

03/16/21 Tuesday

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'They Want to Come Back': US Interested in Restoring Iran Nuclear Deal, IAEA Says
by [Mary F.](#)

The International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) in February stated that Iran has continued to advance its nuclear program by enriching uranium and installing new centrifuges at its Natanz plant in Iran's Isfahan Province.

During a video conference before three European Parliament committees on Tuesday, International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) Director General Rafael Grossi said "it takes two to tango" when asked about Iran's insistence that the US make the first step when returning to the 2015 nuclear deal, [The Times of Israel noted](#).

Iran has stated that the US must drop sanctions against them before it resumes compliance with the deal. Under the nuclear deal, Iran cannot enrich uranium beyond a 3.67 percent limit.

In addition, Grossi warned that Iran has accumulated a great deal of nuclear material and capacities over the past several years since the former US president, Donald Trump, withdrew Washington from the deal in May 2018.

"Even if you had a magic wand or the hand of God and said we go back tomorrow, there will be a lot of housekeeping," he noted.

Grossi also said that he has been collaborating with both Iran and the US on a return to the deal and does believe that a US return to the deal, also known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), is feasible.

"They [the US] want to come back," he said. "But of course ... there are a number of issues that still need to be clarified. So it's not impossible. It is difficult, but not impossible."

Last month, Iran began restricting IAEA inspections of its nuclear facilities. The move is believed to be bid to pressure the US to lift economic sanctions against Iran and revitalize the nuclear deal. In addition, Iran revealed in January that it plans to enrich uranium [up to 20 percent](#) at the Fordow Fuel Enrichment Plant, which is under the control of the Atomic Energy Organization of Iran.

In an [op-ed](#) published in The Wall Street Journal on Sunday, Jared Kushner, former US president Donald Trump's son-in-law and former senior White House advisor, commended Biden for expressing interest in restoring the JCPOA.

"While many were troubled by the Biden team's opening offer to work with Europe and rejoin the Iran deal, known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, I saw it as a smart diplomatic move," Kushner wrote.

Iran has firmly rejected any renegotiating of the original 2015 deal and insisted the US should lift sanctions first. Iranian officials repeatedly states it was the United States that withdrew from the agreement, while the rest of its member states "have remained committed to the deal until now."

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Nearly Half of US Parents Say Teens Facing New or Worsening Mental Health During Pandemic
- Poll
by [Mary F.](#)

In addition to leading to physical health problems, the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted many people's mental health as social-distancing measures, necessary to reduce the spread of the deadly disease, have left many feeling isolated and lonely.

Nearly half (46%) of US parents say their teen has demonstrated signs of a new or worsening health condition since the pandemic onset in March 2020, according to a new poll conducted by C.S. Mott Children's Hospital at the University of Michigan Medical School. The poll was based on responses from almost 1,000 parents of teens. The teens were between the ages of 13 and 18.

The poll also found that the parents of teen girls were more likely to state that their children had worsening mental health conditions than parents of teen boys.

"Just as young people are at the age of being biologically primed to seek independence from their families, COVID-19 precautions have kept them at home," poll co-director Gary L. Freed said in a [recent press release](#).

"Pandemic-related lifestyle changes have wreaked havoc on teens' lives, with many experiencing disruptions to their normal routines. Our poll suggests that pandemic-era changes may have had a significant mental health impact for some teenagers," Freed added.

The poll found that one in three teen girls and one in five teen boys have experienced new or aggravated anxiety since the COVID-19 pandemic. In addition, around 24% of teen girl parents said that the child has had negative changes in sleep compared to 21% of teen boy parents. Parents also reported their children withdrawing from family (14% for girls versus 13% for boys) and exhibiting aggressive behavior (8% for girls versus 9%).

"Isolation during the pandemic may be triggering new problems for some teens but for others, the situation has exacerbated existing emotional health issues," Freed explained.

Many parents also reported that their teens have been texting (64%), using social media (56%), playing online games (43%), and talking on the phone (35%) every day or almost every day during the pandemic. Very few parents, however, said that their teens have been gathering in person with friends either indoors (9%) or outdoors (6%).

"Peer groups and social interactions are a critical part of development during adolescence. But these opportunities have been limited during the pandemic. Many teens may feel frustrated, anxious and disconnected due to social distancing and missing usual social outlets, like sports, extracurricular activities and hanging out with friends," Freed explained.

Parents who have noticed changes in their teens' mental health have tried different ways to help their teens by relaxing social media rules, connecting their child with a professional health professional or providing their child access to a mental health app.

"Parents play a critical role in helping their teens cope with the stress of the pandemic," Freed explained.

"There are strategies parents can engage to help, whether or not their teen is showing signs of problems. One of the most important things for parents to do is keep lines of communication open; ask their teen how they are doing and create the space for them to speak honestly so they can provide help when needed," he added.

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Zarif Slams US Meddling in Mideast, Calls on Neighbors to Collaborate for Regional Security by [Mary E.](#)

The US sanctions on Iran in response to the country's nuclear program have prevented Iranian people from getting access to humanitarian imports, such as essential medicines for ailments like epilepsy and cancer.

Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif on Tuesday slammed the US' meddling in the Middle East as well as the US sanctions on Iran during a deadly COVID-19 pandemic.

"[The] US economic war against Iran has consequences, including hurdles in fighting the coronavirus pandemic in Iran," Zarif said during the second International Tehran Dialogue Forum, where he was joined with Turkish and Afghan counterparts, [Press TV reported](#).

According to a [report](#) by Human Rights Watch, the US sanctions against Iran, coupled with the steep depreciation of the Iranian currency, the rial, have had "devastating effects on millions of patients" who rely on essential medicines and medical equipment from outside Iran.

Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu also denounced the unilateral sanctions against Iran, expressing support for Washington's restoration of the 2015 Iran nuclear deal.

"We can achieve peace and prosperity together in our region," he noted.

Afghan Foreign Minister Hanif Atmar also warned about security threats in Afghanistan, warning that the country should not become a breeding ground for terrorists.

During his speech, Zarif also accused the US of spending billions of dollars on its military industry to interfere in the Middle East's affairs. He also called for dialogue among regional nations to prevent outside interference by the US, noting that "Iran is ready to hold talks with all its neighbors" over the region's security.

Iran has long advocated that peace be established in the region without any intervention from foreign forces. Iran's Hormuz Peace Endeavor (HOPE) initiative was disclosed by Iran during the 74th United National General Assembly in 2019. The purpose of the plan is to establish security in the Middle East, including in the Persian Gulf, the Strait of Hormuz and the Sea of Oman, with the assistance of all countries in the region.

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Pfizer Sees 'Significant Opportunity' After Pandemic to Hike Prices 900% for Annual COVID-19 Shots

by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

Recent comments by a senior figure at pharmaceutical giant Pfizer have highlighted how the company is looking to turn COVID-19 into a longer-lasting pillar of its business model, including dramatically increasing prices for what could become annual booster shots, as well as the possible effects of a third dose.

With mass vaccination underway, an end to the pandemic period of COVID-19 is within the bounds of imagination. However, once the uncontained global spread of the disease is over, what comes next? For New York-based pharmaceutical giant Pfizer, that's when the big bucks start coming in.

At the Barclays Global Healthcare Conference last week, Pfizer Chief Financial Officer (CFO) Frank [D'Amelio laid out](#) for investors the company's plan to dramatically increase the price of its vaccine against SARS-CoV-2, the virus that causes COVID-19, by nearly 900%, once governments stop being the primary buyers of their vaccine, which they have jointly produced with German firm BioNTech.

"Based on everything we've seen to date, we believe it's becoming increasingly likely that an annual revaccination is going to take place," D'Amelio said on Thursday, adding that it would most likely be a single-dose booster.

He said that so far, pricing for the shot has been dictated primarily by the "needs of governments" to secure enough doses to vaccinate their entire populations at no cost to the receiver.

"As we move from a pandemic state, from a pandemic situation to an endemic situation, normal market forces, normal market conditions will start to kick in. And factors like efficacy, booster ability, clinical utility will basically become very important, and we view that as, quite frankly, a significant opportunity for our vaccine from a demand perspective, from a pricing perspective, given the clinical profile of our vaccine," D'Amelio said, adding that "we think as this shifts from pandemic to endemic, we think there's an opportunity here for us."

When the disease becomes endemic, that means it's here to stay and will continue to break out periodically in parts of the population. This is much the case for a disease like influenza, for which an annual vaccine booster is often recommended.

Last month, D'Amelio told [Wall Street analysts](#) that Pfizer gets \$19.50 per dose at present, but noted "that's not a normal price, like we typically get for a vaccine - \$150, \$175 per dose ... Let's go beyond a pandemic pricing environment, the environment we're currently in: Obviously, we're going to get more on price." That's an almost-ninefold increase in price.

Pfizer pulled in \$15 billion in revenue last just on COVID-related products last year, D'Amelio further noted. He urged that "our objective is always to be very prudent with our shareholders' capital but always to maximize shareholder return." Indeed, on Thursday Pfizer's share value has increased by 3.6% since Thursday, which [Fox Business credited](#) to D'Amelio's comments. CEO Albert [Bourla has claimed](#) the company refused to take federal money because he "wanted to keep Pfizer out of politics," spending \$1.5 billion on vaccine research, but the Trump administration also [sent Pfizer \\$1.95 billion](#) in July 2020 via Operation Warp Speed - one of the largest such contracts under the program - for the first 100 million doses of the vaccine, which were not [delivered until December](#). In [December and again](#) in February, the [US each time bought](#) 100 million doses for the same price.

In November, the Department of Health and [Human Services revealed](#) that its deal with Pfizer did not include government rights to intellectual property developed in the manufacturing of the vaccine.

In other words, public money helped Pfizer deliver a vaccine for public use, which the company will now seek to transform into a new cash cow for the handful of [wealthy private investors](#) who own most of Pfizer's stock.

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US Intel Releases Report Claiming Russia Tried to Undermine Biden in 2020 Election
by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

A declassified report by the National Intelligence Council claims that Russian government organizations waged a disinformation war against US President Joe Biden during the 2020 presidential election campaign at the direction of Russian President Vladimir Putin. The analysts reported no evidence of foreign hacking in the election.

The report is a declassified version of one presented to US President Donald Trump and legislative leaders on January 7, 2021, by the National Intelligence Council, an analysis and advisory body to the Director of National Intelligence (DNI).

[According to the report](#), the NIC has assessed that "Russian President Putin authorized, and a range of Russian government organizations conducted, influence operations aimed at denigrating President Biden's candidacy and the Democratic Party, supporting former President Trump, undermining public confidence in the electoral process, and exacerbating sociopolitical divisions in the US."

The report further notes that "unlike in 2016, we did not see persistent Russian cyber efforts to gain access to election infrastructure," and also notes that "we have no indications that any foreign actor attempted to alter any technical aspects of the voting process in the 2020 US elections, including voter registration, casting ballots, vote tabulation, or reporting results."

This influence, the report claims, included both repeating Trump's messaging where Russia was assumed to support the message and criticizing Trump when his actions went against assumed Russian interest, with the same being true for Biden, as well as making "allegations of social media censorship" and highlighting "US divisions surrounding protests about racial justice."

It goes on to claim that a variety of other nations and groups also "took some steps to attempt to influence the election," including Hezbollah, Cuba, Venezuela, China, and Iran, the lattermost of which the NIC accused of carrying out a "multi-pronged covert influence campaign" that allegedly attempted to "undercut" Trump's re-election prospects without directly promoting his rivals," which it says was at the direction of Ayatollah Ali Khamenei.

In the weeks before the November 3, 2020, election, then-DNI [John Ratcliffe claimed](#) that Iran and Russia had "taken specific actions to influence public opinion relating to [US] elections," including Iran supposedly sending "spoofed emails designed to intimidate voters, incite social unrest and damage." However, metadata from those emails, which purported to be from the pro-Trump right-wing gang Proud Boys and threatened would-be Biden voters, actually pointed

to a number of countries other than Iran, including Saudi Arabia, Estonia, Singapore and the United Arab Emirates, according to [the Washington Post](#).

Biden's Ukraine Connections Targeted

According to the NIC, this Russian influence was carried out in part by "Russian proxies" in Ukraine who "sought to use prominent US persons and media conduits to launder their narratives to US officials and audiences." In particular, the report cites [audio recordings released](#) last year by Ukrainian lawmaker Andrii Derkach [and others of 2016](#) conversations between Biden and former Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko that revealed the extent to which Biden pressured him to fire Prosecutor General Viktor Shokin.

At the time, Biden was US vice president and his son, Hunter Biden, sat on the board of Burisma Holdings, a gas company Shokin was investigating.

The NIC claims that the masterminds of the anti-Biden disinformation operation were Derkach and political consultant Konstantin Kilimnik, the latter of [whom was claimed](#) in the 2019 Mueller Report to have "ties to Russian intelligence." A subsequent [investigation by Sputnik](#) found it far more likely that Kilimnik is connected to US intelligence than it is that he has GRU connections.

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IAEA Reports Underground Uranium Enrichment Begun on IR-4 Centrifuges at Iran's Natanz Plant

by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

According to an International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) report obtained by Reuters, Iran has begun enriching uranium on a cascade of advanced IR-4 centrifuges at its Natanz facility. According to the terms of the 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), the only centrifuges that may be housed underground at the Natanz enrichment plant are the older IR-1 centrifuges, which are only one-quarter as efficient as the newer IR-4 centrifuges. However, Tehran elected to shift the advanced centrifuges underground last year after an [apparent sabotage incident](#) destroyed an above-ground centrifuge workshop in July 2020.

The underground facility is considerably more secure than the above-ground installations, as well as better able to withstand air attack - something [Israel has repeatedly](#) threatened to do and which [Trump also weighed](#) as an option.

In November, the Iranian Majlis passed a law mandating the country begin a gradual reduction of its commitments to the JCPOA, with the intent of pressuring the United States to return to the deal it unilaterally left in 2018. Those measures include increasing the purity of uranium being refined as well as the volume of refined uranium that is stored, as well as limiting the ability of IAEA inspectors to launch surprise inspections. In January, the Atomic Energy Organization of Iran [announced a maximum](#) uranium purity of 20% U-235, which is far above the 3.67% allowed under the JCPOA but nowhere near the roughly 90% purity required to make a usable nuclear bomb.

Signed between Iran, the US, UK, France, Germany, European Union, Russia, and China, the deal saw Iran give up its nuclear weapons program and accept strict limitations on uranium

production, sufficient to furnish a few small power stations and the nation's hospitals with advanced medical tools. In turn, economic sanctions against the country were dropped. The US left the deal in May 2018, claiming Iran had been secretly violating the deal and reimposing harsh economic sanctions. However, none of the other nations agreed with the US' assessment and have attempted to remain within the deal, albeit while still bowing to US pressure to curb trade and transactions with Iran.

Prior to taking office, US President Joe Biden indicated his willingness to return to the deal, but since his January inauguration has struck a [much more confrontational](#) line, insisting that Iran be the first to nation to act before the US follows. Tehran has insisted the US must return to the deal first, since it was the party that left the deal without Iran having done wrong.

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US Army Memo Reveals Leadership Opposed Deploying National Guard Ahead of Capitol Riot - Report
by [Gaby Arancibia](#)

In light of the deadly Capitol riot, law enforcement leadership have been heavily criticized for a series of security failures, especially as it took hours for officials to regain control of the situation. Recent hearings held on Capitol Hill revealed to lawmakers that it took over three hours before the National Guard was cleared for deployment.

US Army leadership initially refused a request from the Washington, DC government to deploy a small group of National Guard troops to the nation's capital in anticipation of the January 6 "Stop the Steal" rally, an internal draft memo has revealed.

Obtained by [The Washington Post](#), the internal memo indicates that the senior military officials believed the US Army did not need to be involved in the day's security detail unless more than 100,000 attendees were expected to present at the rally, of which thousands of Trump loyalists broke away from and proceeded to storm the US Capitol.

The memo also urged for the request to be rejected on the basis that a federal agency had not been picked to run the preparations or the operations that would take place as events kicked off, and that no resources from other federal agencies had been exhausted. Additionally, it was noted that local law enforcement were "far better suited" for the policing operation.

Citing four anonymous sources familiar with the matter, the Post reported that the military branch's hesitance was further relayed during talks held at the US Department of Defense the weekend before the "Stop the Steal" was scheduled to take place near the White House.

Sources also revealed to the outlet that the deployment was only cleared after US Army officials came under pressure by then-acting US Defense Secretary Christopher Miller and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Gen. Mark Milley, as well as realizing that local Washington leaders were not going to reach out to the Justice Department for assistance.

Although military leadership did end up giving into the request, which was made via a letter dated December 31 by DC Mayor Muriel Bowser, the service's initial response toward the personnel plea highlights the hesitancy that was felt among the top ranks of the military.

Asked about the report, Col. Cathay Wilkinson, a spokesperson for the US Army, explained in a statement to the Post that the "draft memo was not signed or approved," noting that it was "customary for the Army staff to provide options for Army senior leaders to inform their decision making process."

Unlike the 50 US states in which governors have the final say on deploying National Guard troops, in Washington, DC, that falls on the shoulders of the US president, who delegates the authority to both the US defense secretary and the Army secretary.

Earlier, as congressional lawmakers held a slew of hearings to gain a better understanding of the January 6 security breaches that allowed thousands of individuals to storm the Capitol, it was revealed the National Guard remained on standby for a period of just over three hours during the siege.

At the time, Maj. Gen. William Walker, the commanding general of the DC National Guard, [told senators](#) that the delay was the result of last-minute protocol changes, and also because some officials were worried about how the American public might view the military's efforts to control the riot.

Concerns were primarily rooted in the response by US troops during the June protests in the city that saw peaceful protesters violently ushered away from the White House.

The latest findings by the Post come on the heels of a [recent extension](#) granted by the Pentagon allowing National Guard troops to remain in Washington, DC, for an additional two months. The nation's capital has remained on high alert amid concerns of potential domestic terrorism threats.

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US May Impose Sanctions on Russia Over Alleged Election Meddling as Soon as Next Week - Report
by [Gaby Arancibia](#)

Earlier, a 15-page declassified report released by the National Intelligence Council (NIC) alleged that Russian President Vladimir Putin knew of and directed a state effort to manipulate the heated 2020 presidential election so it would favor former US President Donald Trump's reelection efforts.

The Biden administration is reportedly gearing up to issue an undisclosed number of sanctions against Russia in the coming week as a response to the NIC report that claims Moscow allegedly attempted to influence the US election.

Citing three unidentified officials from the US Department of State, [CNN reported](#) Tuesday that aside from Russia, the looming sanctions will also be targeting China and Iran.

The [NIC report](#) alleged that both China and Iran were among a group of nations that "took some steps to attempt to influence the election," noting that Tehran had "carried out a multi-pronged covert influence campaign intended to undercut" Trump's reelection efforts.

As for China, officials concluded that the nation allegedly "considered but did not deploy influence efforts intended to change the outcome of the US presidential election."

Investigators further explained in their findings that China "did not view either election outcome as being advantageous enough for China to risk getting caught meddling." Rather, China used economic measures and lobbying to shape its policies with Washington.

Other countries lumped in the offending group included Venezuela and Cuba, along with Hezbollah.

The report, which was initially presented to Trump and legislative officials on January 7 - the day after the deadly Capitol riot, accuses Putin and a "range of Russian government organizations" of having carried out operations that diminished Biden's candidacy and "undermin[ed] public confidence in the electoral process," among other accusations.

"Unlike in 2016, we did not see persistent Russian cyber efforts to gain access to election infrastructure," the report states.

"A key element of Moscow's strategy this election cycle was its use of proxies linked to Russian intelligence to push influence narratives - including misleading or unsubstantiated allegations against President Biden - to US media organizations, US officials, and prominent US individuals, including some close to former President Trump and his administration."

However, while the report urges that various parties attempted to influence the 2020 election, it also emphasizes that there are "no indications that any foreign actor attempted to alter any technical aspect of the voting process in the 2020 US elections, including voter registration, casting ballots, vote tabulation, or reporting results."

The conclusion ultimately echoes a [statement](#) previously issued by Christopher Krebs, the former director of the Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency. Krebs was [dismissed](#) from his post after the November election as he had spearheaded a campaign to counter unsubstantiated rumors of voter fraud that were repeatedly voiced by Trump and his supporters.

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Fauci Warns Against Declaring Victory Over COVID-19 Amid Concerns of Potential Surge by [Gaby Arancibia](#)

Data recently released by Johns Hopkins suggests the US is experiencing a mass decrease in the positivity ratio associated with COVID-19 infections. However, prominent medical officials are warning that the deadly SARS-CoV-2 virus' hold on the nation still has the potential to cripple the country should preventative measures not remain in place.

Dr. Anthony Fauci, one of the US' leading medical professionals on the novel coronavirus, recently urged the American public against declaring a victory against COVID-19 because the deadly disease remains a threat to the nation.

In a [Tuesday interview](#) with MSNBC's "Morning Joe," Fauci highlighted that while the daily new case counts have bounced between 45,000 and 60,000, those figures are "still at a level that are really quite risky."

[Latest figures](#) released by Johns Hopkins University state the US reported nearly 57,000 new COVID-19 cases as of Tuesday, with the related death toll continuing to maintain somewhat of a

rise. An increase in COVID-19 cases have been reported in New York, Alabama, Texas, Michigan and North Carolina.

Similarly, while hospitalizations have been on the decline since the beginning of the year, an estimated 40,212 individuals remain hospitalized, according to the [COVID Tracking Project](#), which also noted that over 8,100 individuals are currently registered in intensive care units. At present, nearly 3,000 Americans have been placed on ventilators.

Touching on the decrease from the “extraordinarily high” case numbers reported during the winter months, Fauci told show host Mirka Brzezinski that current figures are “much better than the few hundred thousand per day, but it’s still at an unacceptably high level.”

“We’ve really got to be careful that we don’t claim victory and pull back on all the public health measures that we know work in keeping the lid on these surging of infections,” he said, referring to masking and social distancing measures promoted by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Fauci underscored the US will continue “going in the right direction” so long as officials carry on with enforcing preventative COVID-19 measures and successfully organize the rollout of approved vaccines. The US has only given clearance to three vaccines, those produced by companies Moderna, Pfizer-BioNTech and Johnson & Johnson.

However, Fauci, who also serves as the director of the US National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, warned if the US declared a “victory” preemptively, “we can risk a surge.” He explained that a similar situation has since unfolded across Europe, where leaders lax measures and then “all of a sudden [COVID-19] started to surge again.”

“We want to make sure that does not happen here in the United States,” Fauci doubled down. The Tuesday remarks largely echoed previous statements made by Fauci that emphasized the US still has a long way to go before being able to declare the end of COVID-19. Speaking on NBC’s “Meet the Press” over the weekend, Fauci [reiterated](#) to viewers that “we are not in the end zone yet” when it comes to the pandemic.

The latest comments from Fauci came as several [US states](#) have lifted their COVID-19 restrictions on social gatherings and limits on the amount of individuals allowed inside businesses, particularly restaurants. States that have eased their restrictions include Texas, Maryland, Mississippi, Connecticut and Arizona, among others across the nation.

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Seeing is Believing - Political Cartoon

Under the Biden administration, it appears as though the US has begun to experience one of its worst migrant surges over the last two decades at the US-Mexico border, where US President Joe Biden has yet to make an appearance amid concerning border reports.

White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki recently informed reporters that the president has no scheduled visits to the US-Mexico border, despite growing reports detailing the rising immigration crisis.

Psaki told reporters that Biden was instead monitoring the events, and that other administration officials would be going to the US' southern border to assess the situation. She also took the opportunity to dismiss attempts by reporters to label the border situation a "crisis," even as reports emerge of [overcrowded](#) detention centers housing unaccompanied minors.

Earlier Tuesday, Homeland Security Secretary Alejandro Mayorkas tiptoed around the "crisis" label, opting to describe the migration surge at the border as a "difficult situation" in a [statement](#) on the latest developments.

[Latest figures](#) state more than 4,200 unaccompanied minors were in the custody of the US Border Patrol, with an estimated 2,943 children being placed in the agency's care longer than the maximum 72-hour hold.

[Crisis](#), a situation that has reached a critical phase.

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US Senator Accuses FBI of Conducting 'Fake' Background Check on Brett Kavanaugh
by [Gaby Arancibia](#)

Brett Kavanaugh was confirmed as an associate Supreme Court justice by one of the slimmest margins in October 2018, months after the Washington, DC-native was nominated by former US President Donald Trump. Kavanaugh's confirmation proceedings were riddled with controversy after allegations surfaced that he had sexually assaulted a former classmate.

US Sen. Sheldon Whitehouse (D-RI) recently raised questions about the authenticity of the FBI's background investigation into Supreme Court Justice Brett Kavanaugh, alleging that the agency carried out a "politically-constrained and perhaps fake" probe.

Whitehouse, who serves on the Senate Judiciary Committee, raised the issue in a [letter](#) sent to newly confirmed US Attorney General Merrick Garland last Thursday, and requested that the official carry out a "proper oversight" into the bureau's 2018 investigation into the sexual misconduct allegations that consumed the then-Supreme Court nominee.

Kavanaugh's nomination was initially placed in jeopardy after a former classmate, Christine Blasey Ford, accused the now-justice of having sexually assaulted her when the pair were still in high school. At the time, Blasey Ford was 15 and Kavanaugh was 17 when they met at a house party.

Although additional allegations surfaced from other women, only Blasey Ford was allowed to testify before the Senate Judiciary Committee. Kavanaugh repeatedly denied all accusations when he appeared before the Senate panel.

A subsequent investigation into the allegations were heavily criticized by Democrats who saw the probe as a sham, since the bureau failed to contact multiple witnesses who had corroborating evidence. Investigators had also dropped the ball when it came to looking into additional allegations that had involved Kavanaugh in his youth.

"Some of these allegations were brought to the attention of committee members on behalf of witnesses who had 'tried in vain to reach the FBI on their own,' but could find no one at the Bureau willing to accept their testimony," Whitehouse wrote. "When members made inquiries we faced the same experience: the FBI had assigned no person to accept or gather evidence."

"This was unique behavior in my experience, as the Bureau is usually amenable to information and evidence; but in this matter the shutters were closed, the drawbridge drawn up, and there was no point of entry by which members of the public or Congress could provide information to the FBI. Senator Coons asked for a clear procedure at the time, to no avail," he continued. The bureau did later launch a so-called "tip line" for individuals to relay any information regarding the case; however, the effort was ineffective. "When allegations flowed in through that 'tip line,' we received no explanation of how, or whether, those allegations were processed and evaluated," Whitehouse recalled.

"This 'tip line' appears to have operated more like a garbage chute, with everything that came down the chute consigned without review to the figurative dumpster," he went on to conclude. Whitehouse also blasted FBI Director Christopher Wray for failing to answer congressional questions about the investigation, noting that "such stonewalling does not inspire confidence in the integrity of the investigation."

The US Department of Justice has confirmed that it is reviewing the contents of Whitehouse's correspondence, but did not offer further details when contacted by [The Hill](#). The Justice Department [previously defended](#) the FBI investigation into Kavanaugh, stating that its procedures were in line with its practices to ensure a nominee does not pose a national security risk.

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'This is a Relapse': Catholic Priests Pledge to Bless Same-Sex Marriages, Despite Vatican Statement
by [Evan Craighead](#)

On Monday, the Vatican's orthodoxy office issued a statement clarifying that the Roman Catholic Church cannot bless same-sex unions, as God "does not and cannot bless sin." While many conservatives applauded the Church's unchanged stance, some members of the Catholic community are pushing the Vatican to take a more progressive position.

The Parish Priests Initiative, an Austria-based group of Catholics led by Father Helmut Schueller, issued a statement saying its members are "deeply appalled" by the Roman Catholic Church's March 15 [release](#), which was notably approved by Pope Francis before its publication. "We members of the Parish Priests Initiative are deeply appalled by the new Roman decree that seeks to prohibit the blessing of same-sex loving couples. This is a relapse into times that we had hoped to have overcome with Pope Francis," the group statement read, as reported [by Reuters](#).

"We will -- in solidarity with so many -- not reject any loving couple in the future who ask to celebrate God's blessing, which they experience every day, also in a worship service."

The Parish Priests Initiative is composed of more than 350 members from the official Church and has around 3,000 lay supporters, according to Reuters.

Schuller, who was a former deputy to Vienna archbishop Cardinal Christoph Schoenborn, was stripped of his title by the Church in 2012.

While the initiative has gained support from priests in both the US and Europe, it has also [been critiqued](#) for calling on the Vatican to do away with priestly celibacy. Many members of the group also advocate for the ordination of women.

Additional groups and individuals belonging to the 1.3 billion-member Roman Catholic Church have expressed that if the Vatican fails to modernize its approach to same-sex unions, then lay Catholics will have to step in.

"If priests and pastoral ministers no longer feel they can perform such a blessing, the Catholic laity will step in and perform their own rituals," Francis DeBernardo, executive director of New Ways Ministry - a church that advocates for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender Catholics, told the [Associated Press](#) on Monday.

Robert Shine, associate director of the ministry, published [an op-ed](#) on Tuesday in which he slammed the Vatican's statement as a product of "misguided logic."

"It seems church leaders have yet to learn a simple lesson: you cannot just order the faithful to stop conversing about a disputed topic," Shine wrote. "This approach did not work with birth control in the 1960s, nor with the discussion over women priests in the 1990s, and it will not work now."

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Videos: Syrian Air Defense Repell Attack South of Damascus, State Media Report by [Evan Craighead](#)

Early reports have linked the rockets to the Israel Defense Forces (IDF), as multiple videos of the airstrike were shared on Twitter. They also alleged the attack was launched from the Golan Heights, currently under the control of the Israeli army.

The Syrian Arab News Agency (SANA) confirmed Tuesday that air defense systems were engaging several "hostile targets" in southern Syria, near the capital of Damascus.

"At exactly 22:35 PM [local time] today, Israel carried out airstrikes from the direction of the occupied Golan Heights against some targets in the vicinity of Damascus", SANA said.

Social media footage allegedly shows an aerial explosion that occurred south of the Syrian capital Tuesday evening.

SANA reported that at least four explosions could be heard from central Damascus. It also tweeted footage of the attack.

No fatalities, nor any casualties have been reported at this time. As the reports emerged, the Israeli army refused to comment on the airstrikes.

"We do not comment on foreign media reports," the IDF told Sputnik.

The area in which the explosions occurred is said to be the same site [allegedly struck](#) by the IDF on the night of February 28. According to SANA, the airstrike was launched from the Golan

Heights, which has been mostly under Israel's control since the country seized the area from Syria during the 1967 Six-Day War.

It's unlikely Israeli officials will confirm or deny the incident, as the country's military has a policy against speaking on Syria-related operations. In December, however, IDF Chief of Staff Lt.-Gen. Aviv Kochavi [did confirm](#) that the Israeli army had launched numerous attacks in Syria targeting what he "the Iranian entrenchment" in the Arab Republic.

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Blinken: US Will 'Push Back' Against China's 'Coercion and Aggression' in Indo-Pacific
by [Evan Craighead](#)

In their first overseas trip, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken and Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin visited Tokyo, Japan, and met with several Japanese officials, including Foreign Minister Toshimitsu Motegi and Defense Minister Nobuo Kishi, to hold a "two-plus-two," bilateral dialogue regarding the Indo-Pacific region.

The US' top diplomat issued a warning to China on Tuesday, urging Beijing to shy away from their usual "coercion and aggression" in the Indo-Pacific region.

"China uses coercion and aggression to systematically erode autonomy in Hong Kong, undercut democracy in Taiwan, abuse human rights in Xinjiang and Tibet, and assert maritime claims in the South China Sea that violate international law," Blinken said during the March 16 news conference from Tokyo.

"We're united in the vision of a free and open Indo-Pacific region, where countries follow the rules, cooperate whenever they can, and resolve their differences peacefully. And in particular, we will push back if necessary when China uses coercion or aggression to get its way."

Blinken's comments come just days before he and US national security adviser Jake Sullivan are [scheduled](#) to meet with Chinese counterparts in Alaska. The purpose of the upcoming meeting is so that both parties may get "an understanding of each other," according to a senior administration official.

"This really is a one-off meeting. This is not a resumption of a particular dialogue mechanism or the beginning of a dialogue process," they added.

During a Tuesday news conference, Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson Zhao [Lijian said](#) that Beijing is optimistic about enhanced cooperation between Tokyo and Washington, so long as their strengthened relationship does not harm others in the Indo-Pacific region.

"We believe that exchanges and cooperation between the US and Japan should help regional countries enhance mutual understanding and trust, strengthen solidarity and cooperation, and uphold peace and stability in Asia Pacific. Their interactions shall not target a third party or hurt the interests of a third party," he said, according to an English language translation.

While holding their first phone call last month, US President Joe Biden and Chinese President Xi Jinping spoke about a range of topics, including "the shared challenges of global health security, climate change, and preventing weapons proliferation," according to a White House [release](#) on their talks.

Biden has [notably referred](#) to China as the US' "most serious competitor," but has also expressed a desire to "work with Beijing when it's in America's interest to do so."

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RPT - Biden Admin. Confirms Plans to Use Dallas Convention Center to House Migrant Children

WASHINGTON, March 16 (Sputnik) - The US Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) will utilize a convention center in Dallas, Texas, to hold asylum-seeking migrant children who are arriving in overwhelming numbers at the US-Mexico border, a spokesperson said in a statement to Sputnik.

"The US Department of Health and Human Services' (HHS) aggressively works with its interagency partners to ensure that unaccompanied migrant children (UC) are safe and unified with family members or other suitable sponsors as quickly and safely as possible. To support this effort, HHS has selected the Kay Bailey Hutchison Convention Center in Dallas to serve as an Emergency Intake Site beginning on or around, Wednesday, March 17," the statement said Tuesday.

The convention center will provide needed space to hold migrant children while they are processed and transferred to a sponsor or long-term federal care facility, the statement said. At the convention center, HHS will provide migrant children with clean and comfortable sleeping quarters, meals, toiletries, laundry, and access to medical services, including coronavirus screening, the statement said.

The use of the Dallas convention center will help decrease over-crowding at US border facilities, the statement said.

US media reported on Monday that the facility will be used to hold up to 3,000 migrant children. Last week, a HHS spokesperson told Sputnik that a total of 8,800 migrant children who came to the United States alone are in federal care facilities.

Data from US Customs and Border Protection shows 9,457 unaccompanied migrant children were apprehended at the southern border in February, which is a substantial increase from the 5,858 unaccompanied migrant children apprehended in January. At least 29,729 migrant children have been apprehended at the US-Mexico border in the period from October to February.

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RPT - Texas to Suffer Big Blow If Biden Prolongs Gulf of Mexico Drilling Ban - Energy Alliance

WASHINGTON, March 16 (Sputnik) - The US state of Texas would be significantly impacted if the Biden administration halts oil and gas leases on federal territory in the Gulf of Mexico for a

prolonged period of time, Texas Alliance of Energy Producers President Jason Modglin told Sputnik.

When President Joe Biden assumed office in January, he signed executive orders that temporarily suspended new oil and gas leases on federal lands and rescinded the construction permit for the Keystone XL pipeline, which was previously granted by former President Donald Trump in 2019.

"Texas would be impacted pretty substantially if federal leasing in the Gulf of Mexico was impaired for a long period of time... if a moratorium was issued for a long time," Modglin said. Modglin pointed out that Biden's actions have already impacted the oil and gas industry nationwide, but Texas is has been somewhat insulated from he pains caused by Biden's executive actions.

Modglin warned that a permanent ban on offshore drilling in federal waters would slash revenues for the state and federal governments. Offshore oil and gas production in the Gulf of Mexico supports about 120,000 jobs, Modglin said citing the American Petroleum Institute. Production in the Gulf of Mexico accounts for about 20 percent of the overall US oil and gas production, Modglin noted.

The novel coronavirus pandemic has already harmed the Texas energy sector, leading to about 60,000 jobs lost in the state in the upstream oil and gas base, Modglin said. About 10,000 jobs have been lost nationwide due to the cancelation of permits for pipelines, including the Keystone XL pipeline, he added.

Recently-confirmed Secretary of the Interior Debra Haaland, who is the first Native American to hold a cabinet position, said the Biden administration's ban on new oil and natural gas leases on federal land is a temporary pause to review the federal fossil fuel program and is not a permanent prohibition.

Haaland has also said that thousands of leases and thousands of permits continue to move forward, and that new technology to cut greenhouse gases from fossil fuels is key to the Biden administration's goal of transitioning to an economy with net zero carbon emissions by 2050.

"[Biden] he's continued to say that he wants to push harder on climate change and really have the United States lead in that base by sacrificing some production here in the United States and becoming more dependent on foreign imports...But oil and gas is not going away in the United States and it's not going away in terms of global demand. Natural gas has an incredible opportunity to continue to reduce global emissions," Modglin said.

Fossil fuel leasing on federal and tribal land accounts for nearly a quarter of the United States' annual carbon output. The drilling program also generated \$11.7 billion in tax revenue for the federal, state, local and tribal governments last year, according to the Interior Department's Office of Natural Resources Revenue.

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Texas Can Learn From Russia How to Winterize Energy Infrastructure - Producer Alliance

WASHINGTON, March 16 (Sputnik) - The US state of Texas is willing to learn from Russia how to better prepare its energy infrastructure to withstand freezing temperatures, Texas Alliance of Energy Producers President Jason Modglin told Sputnik.

"Certainly, if there's opportunities to learn to continue to produce during those cold temperatures, that's a fantastic opportunity," Modglin said when asked if Texas has any interest in learning from Russia how to winterize its energy infrastructure.

In February, a severe winter storm hit several US states, of which Texas was particularly heavily affected and caused prolonged power outages as well as food and water shortages for millions of residents amid the Arctic cold blast.

Freezing temperatures in February left up to 4 million Texans without power for multiple days.

Russian Consul General in Houston Alexander Zakharov told Sputnik last week that businesses in the US states of Texas, Oklahoma, and Louisiana, which were the most affected by the winter storm, are interested in studying how Russia adapts its energy infrastructure to freezing temperatures.

Zakharov said that Russia was prepared to help Texas, Oklahoma, and Louisiana respond to emergency needs during the winter storm, but state officials declined the offer.

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US Sees Alaska Meeting With China as Stand-Alone Event, Not Start of Mechanism

WASHINGTON, March 16 (Sputnik) - The United States sees an upcoming meeting with top Chinese officials as a stand-alone event rather than the beginning of the negotiating process and one that was important to hold on American soil, a senior administration official told reporters.

US National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan and Secretary of State Antony Blinken are hosting on Thursday a meeting in Anchorage, Alaska with a member of China's Politburo Yang Jiechi and China's foreign minister Wang Yi, the first event of a kind since the beginning of Joe Biden's presidency.

"This really is a one-off meeting. This is not a resumption of a particular dialogue mechanism or the beginning of a dialogue process. This is very much about sitting down, getting an understanding of each other and then taking that back and taking stock," the official said during a phone briefing. We just felt for a variety of reasons that being on our own territory was extremely important for this meeting and not attempting to meet in China."

The US administration plans to discuss cyber-related issues with China during the high-level meeting, the official said.

The official added that other pressing matters that will be raised by the US administration include Hong Kong, Taiwan, Uyghurs in Xinjiang, economic coercion of US allies, freedom of navigation in East and South China Seas. The official noted that no negotiated deliverables will come out of the meeting that will take place on Thursday in Anchorage, Alaska.

Over the past several years, China has increased its territorial and maritime claims in the Indo-Pacific region, overlapping with the interests of a number of nations. In particular, Beijing has been locked up in a dispute with Tokyo over a string of uninhabited but resource-rich islets, known as the Senkaku Islands in Japan and the Diaoyu Islands in China.

In addition, Beijing has boosted the scale and frequency of its military drills in the Indo-Pacific, prompting the United States and its regional allies — Japan, India and Australia — to enhance strategic cooperation within the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue in response.

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Texas Energy Alliance Sees Opportunities to Expand LNG Exports to China, India - President

WASHINGTON, March 16 (Sputnik) - Energy producers in the US state of Texas see a substantial number of opportunities to export Liquefied Natural Gas (LNG) to China, India and countries in Africa, Texas Alliance of Energy Producers President Jason Modglin told Sputnik.

"We see substantial number of opportunities around the world, whether it's in Africa or India or China to displace dirtier fuels like coal but also biomass," Modglin said.

Modglin underscored that an opportunity to expand the Texas LNG market to China would be an incredible opportunity that could have a global impact on lower emissions.

"If we continue to invest in cleaner technologies like natural gas in China, you'll see some pretty substantial reductions in global emissions," Modglin said. "In particular, that's where a lot of these renewable components are manufactured. They're manufactured using dirtier fuels and they're not in fact green because of the manufacturing component."

Modglin noted that over the last ten years, the United States has made major investments in renewable energy, but not enough to support thermal generation, coal, nuclear, and natural gas facilities.

However, the Texas LNG market has been substantial and continues to grow, Modglin said, adding that there has been widespread investment to build facilities on the Gulf of Mexico that enable LNG exports overseas. About 36 countries import Texas LNG, Modglin said.

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Enbridge Seeks Ottawa's Help for US-Canadian Pipeline Slated for Closure - Executive

TORONTO, March 16 (Sputnik) - Canada's energy giant Enbridge is seeking help from Ottawa to resolve differences with the US state of Michigan over a pipeline slated for closure, a senior company executive told a Canadian parliamentary committee.

In November, Michigan Governor Gretchen Whitmer announced that her government is moving forward with a plan to shut down Canadian energy giant Enbridge's Line 5 pipelines through the

Straits of Mackinac, citing the threat of oil spills that may devastate the environment and economy.

"Raising the importance of Line 5 at every available opportunity with officials in the US and underscoring the application of the transit pipelines treaty. We also request that the Government of Canada use every pathway to assert that Line 5 is an important binational pipeline... whose shutdown would have a grave impact, both for the United States and Canada," Enbridge Executive Vice President and President, Vern Yu, told the Special Committee on the Economic Relationship between Canada and the United States on Tuesday.

"We believe a bi-national diplomatic solution can resolve this in a timely manner," Yu said, adding that a legal challenge in US federal court to have regulation of the pipeline moved into federal jurisdiction may take years for a case that is time-sensitive.

Yu confirmed that Enbridge would welcome amicus curiae - friendly testimony - from all levels of the Canadian government when the US District Court for the Western District of Michigan begins deliberation on whether it will take up the question of jurisdiction in hearings set to begin on May 12.

Yu emphasized that a shutdown of the pipeline would lead to skyrocketing energy prices and supply shortages in the Canadian provinces of Ontario and Quebec as well as several US states, including Indiana, Ohio and Pennsylvania.

However, the diplomatic outreach on the part of Canadian officials appears to have made little headway. Yu testified that to his knowledge, Canadian ambassador to the United States Kirsten Hillman was denied a meeting with Michigan's governor. US President Joe Biden also previously curbed Canadian energy projects, revoking the presidential permit for the Keystone XL pipeline in one of his first acts as president.

Yu struck down Whitmer's claims of environmental protection violations by Enbridge, asserting that no violations or accidents have occurred in the pipeline's 65-year history. He said the company is committed to construction of the Great Lakes Tunnel project - a tunnel below the straits that would be home to an upgraded version of the pipeline, which Michigan has already approved - but reiterated that an abrupt shutdown of the existing pipeline would have debilitating impacts on both economies.

Yu confirmed that Enbridge does not intend to cease operation of Line 5 on May 12, when Whitmer's notice to the company will go into effect. The executive said Michigan would be required to seek a court injunction to halt operation, which is unlikely to be granted the same day.

Enbridge's efforts do have the support of the Canadian government and most opposition parties. Line 5 transports up to 540,000 barrels per day of light crude oil, light synthetic crude, and natural gas liquids, which are refined into propane, according to Enbridge.

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Canadians Say No to Improved Relations With China Until Detained Compatriots Freed - Poll

TORONTO, March 16 (Sputnik) - An overwhelming majority of Canadians say there can be no improvement in bilateral relations with Beijing until two of their compatriots held in detention in China are released, an Angus Reid Institute poll revealed.

As of Tuesday, Canadian nationals - former diplomat Michael Kovrig and businessman Michael Spavor - have been in Chinese detention for over 800 days on espionage charges. Ottawa, however, maintains that the detentions are retaliatory measures for Canada's detention of Huawei Chief Financial Officer Meng Wanzhou, who was detained in Vancouver in 2018 at the request of the United States.

"Canadians are overwhelmingly of the view that Canada and China cannot break this diplomatic impasse without Kovrig and Spavor both being released. Three-quarters (77%) say that until this happens the relationship will be strained," the poll said on Tuesday.

Only ten percent disagree with the assertion, while 13 percent were unsure.

Additionally, nearly three-quarters of Canadians - 74 percent - say that China's actions with respect to the Uyghurs in Xinjiang province should be labelled a genocide. Canada's House of Commons overwhelmingly adopted a motion last month calling on the Trudeau government to declare the China's counter-radicalization program a genocide.

Prime Minister Justin Trudeau has previously cautioned against the liberal use the word "genocide," saying that it is a term guided by strict international guidelines and that any misuse would weaken the designation.

The poll also found that the Canadian public by a 62 percent margin believes that federal authorities should prohibit Chinese investment in "sensitive industries," such as a finance and telecommunications. Fifty-five percent of respondents supported a Canadian boycott of the 2022 Winter Olympics in Beijing.

Overall, only 14 percent of Canadians currently hold a favorable view of China, according to the poll.

Sino-Canadian relations soured after the arrest of Meng and two Canadian nationals in China - former diplomat Michael Kovrig and businessman Michael Spavor - on charges of espionage and have been further exacerbated by Ottawa's condemnation of Beijing's national security law implemented in Hong Kong and alleged human rights abuses in Xinjiang province.

Both Beijing and Ottawa view the detention of their nationals as political incidents.

Chinese officials have claimed that Canada's deference to US foreign policy served as a catalyst for the growing diplomatic rift.

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US Sees Alaska Meeting With China as Stand-Alone Event, Not Start of Mechanism - Official

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"This really is a one-off meeting. This is not a resumption of a particular dialogue mechanism or the beginning of a dialogue process. This is very much about sitting down, getting an understanding of each other and then taking that back and taking stock," the official said during a phone briefing. We just felt for a variety of reasons that being on our own territory was extremely important for this meeting and not attempting to meet in China."

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US Plans to Discuss Cyber Issues With China at Talks in Alaska - Senior Official

WASHINGTON, March 16 (Sputnik) - The United States plans to discuss cyber-related issues with China during a high-level meeting in Alaska this week, a senior US administration official said during a conference call.

"Cyber is absolutely an issue that we plan to discuss," the official said on Tuesday. "US concerns about Beijing's malicious cyber activities are not new, but it's a continued and ongoing concern and report about recent activity only heighten that. This is definitely an issue where I think we will be making a very clear point about our concerns."

The official added that other matters that will be raised by the US administration include Hong Kong, Taiwan, Uyghurs in Xinjiang, economic coercion of US allies, freedom of navigation in East and South China Seas. The official noted that no negotiated deliverables will come out of the meeting that will take place on Thursday in Anchorage, Alaska.

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US May Announce Sanctions on Russia over Election Allegations Next Week - Reports

WASHINGTON, March 16 (Sputnik) - The United States may as early as next week roll out sanctions against Russia for its alleged interference in the 2020 US presidential election, CNN reported.

"[The United States is] expected to unveil sanctions related to election interference as soon as next week," the report said on Tuesday evening quoting unidentified sources.

Earlier on Tuesday, US intelligence released a report on foreign threats to the 2020 elections. It alleged that Russia's President Vladimir Putin authorized efforts to undermine the then Democratic candidate Joe Biden.

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US Promotes 'Serial Testing' for COVID-19 With Streamlined Approval - Health Dept.

WASHINGTON, March 16 (Sputnik) - The US government issued simplified rules for developers of coronavirus tests to promote serial screening - a process in which the same individual is tested multiple times within a few days, the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) said.

"Today, we are providing information for test developers about a streamlined path to emergency use authorization," the FDA said in a press release on Tuesday. "This [path] applies to developers of molecular and antigen tests, for use in serial testing programs, as well as at-home tests for use in a serial manner outside of a testing program."

Serial testing is used to detect asymptomatic coronavirus infections that fail to show up in a single test, the release said. The release noted that the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) recommends serial testing once a week, in addition to other coronavirus mitigation measures such as wearing facemasks and social distancing.

The FDA said that a test that performs well detecting the virus in symptomatic patients, when combined with serial testing, can likely mitigate the risk of false results in asymptomatic individuals.

Studies show that up to half of people who test positive never develop symptoms, prompting concerns that asymptomatic spreaders provide a major source of coronavirus infections.

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Michigan Man Faces Charges for Death Threats Against Biden, Pelosi- State Attorney General

WASHINGTON, March 16 (Sputnik) - Michigan resident Joshua Docter has been charged for threatening President Joe Biden and US House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, state Attorney General Dana Nessel's office said in a release.

"Michigan Attorney General Dana Nessel has charged a Holland man with crimes for making death threats against President Joe Biden, US House Speaker Nancy Pelosi and Michigan Gov. Gretchen Whitmer," the release said on Tuesday.

Docter is charged with one count of terrorist threat and one count of using a computer to commit a crime and faces 20 years for each felony, the release said.

The FBI initiated the case after it received information about threatening comments Docter made on the iFunny social platform in January 2021, the release added.

Docter's comments were about his intentions to use a gun to shoot and kill the elected officials to start a new American revolution, according to the release.

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SPUTNIK TOP STORIES OF THE DAY

WASHINGTON, March 16 (Sputnik)

US INTELLIGENCE REPORT ON 2020 ELECTION

- * US intelligence alleged that Russian President Vladimir Putin authorized the Russian government to undermine Joe Biden during the 2020 election in the United States, the National Intelligence Council said in a report on Tuesday.
- * US intelligence found no indications that foreign actors attempted to alter voting processes during the 2020 election, a report said.
- * US intelligence alleged in its new report that Iran carried out a campaign to undercut former President Donald Trump's re-election prospects during the 2020 vote.
- * US intelligence found that China did not make efforts to meddle in the 2020 presidential election, the National Intelligence Council said.

MOSCOW CONFERENCE ON AFGHANISTAN

- * The Moscow conference on Afghanistan does not replace ongoing negotiations in Doha, State Department Deputy Spokesperson Jalina Porter said on Tuesday.

INTERNATIONAL TALKS ON SYRIA

- * The Small Group of the Syrian Constitutional Committee plans to convene for its sixth session by the middle of April, Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu said on Tuesday
- * Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov called on the Arab nations and the West to resume dialogue with Syria and abandon the policy of isolation.
- * The Kremlin sees Syrian President Bashar Assad as the country's legitimate leader and keeps making effort to promote the political settlement, Peskov said.
- * Russia and Turkey continue their cooperation on Syria despite the existing disagreements, but the situation remains difficult in Syria's regions where the countries interact, Peskov said,

NEW UK DEFENSE STRATEGY

- * The United Kingdom will create a new space command and support commercial space sector so the country will be able to launch satellites from its soil by 2022, the new defense strategy confirmed on Tuesday.
- * The United Kingdom will create a new Counter Terrorism Centre (CTOC) that will bring together government departments, security and intelligence agencies and elements of the judicial system in order to tackle incidents quicker and stay ahead of the evolving threats, according to the new defense strategy.
- * The United Kingdom pledges to deter and defend against "full spectrum of threats" emerging from Russia which remains the "most acute direct threat" in the 2020s for London, the new defense strategy confirmed.

* The United Kingdom will bolster its nuclear weapon stockpile to 260 warheads in light of the "evolving security environment", the new defense strategy confirmed.

CRIMEA DEVELOPMENTS

* Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov commented on Tuesday on the plans to hold public events in Crimea on the anniversary of its reunification in Russia: he stressed this falls within the mandate of the head of the Republic of Crimea.

* A Russian citizen was detained in Crimea for espionage for Ukrainian special services, he made photos of various facilities in the peninsula and kept a homemade bomb in his vehicle, the Russian Federal Security Service (FSB) said.

* The reunification of Crimea with Russia took place in full accordance with international law, the peninsula is forever a part of Russia, and the West, led by the United States, cannot change this, meanwhile, worldwide interest in developing ties with the region is growing, which Moscow will encourage, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov said.

CORONAVIRUS VACCINES

* The European Medicines Agency (EMA) is currently reviewing the side effects of the AstraZeneca coronavirus vaccine after a number of countries have suspended its use over blood clot concerns, EMA Executive Director Emer Cooke said.

* India's Gland Pharma Ltd said that it had entered into an agreement with the Russian Direct Investment Fund (RDIF) for the supply of up to 252 million doses of Sputnik V vaccine and its production.

* The issue of the complete closure of Russia's borders in connection with the detection of a South African strain of the coronavirus in the country has not been discussed, Deputy Foreign Minister Yevgeny Ivanov told Sputnik.

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Biden to Hold First Press Conference on March 25 - White House

WASHINGTON, March 16 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden will hold his first press conference on March 25, the White House spokeswoman Jen Psaki told reporters on Tuesday. "President Biden will hold a formal press conference on the afternoon of Thursday, March 25th," Psaki announced via the presidential pool. Biden has been criticized for evading the public and failing to schedule a press conference while in office.

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Rights Group Urges Biden to Extend Phase Out of Private Prisons to Migrant Detention

WASHINGTON, March 16 (Sputnik) - President Joe Biden, who recently signed an executive order to phase out private prisons in the United States, needs to extend that order to halt abuses inherent in for-profit detention facilities for illegal migrants, Amnesty International said on Tuesday.

"The vast majority of people under ICE [Immigration and Customs Enforcement] custody are detained in immigration detention facilities owned or managed by private prison corporations, which have a well-documented record of harsh conditions and negligent care," Amnesty International said in a press release.

In a January executive order, Biden told the Justice Department not to renew its contracts with private prisons. Amnesty International said the order does not apply to immigrant facilities, which are used by the Department of Homeland Security.

Amnesty International said in the release that it has previously documented horrifying conditions in immigration detention, including lack of physical distancing, overcrowding, inadequate hygiene, and negligent medical care, making the facilities tinderboxes for the spread of the novel coronavirus.

The rights group called for the immediate release of all illegal immigrants, the release added. The US reported encountering more than 100,000 undocumented immigrants along the Mexican border in February, with critics warning that the nation faces a repeat of the 2018-19 crisis that featured waves of migrant caravans from Central America.

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Iraqi National Faces 10 Years in Prison for Attempt to Smuggle Guns - US Justice Dept.

WASHINGTON, March 16 (Sputnik) - Iraqi citizen and US permanent resident Nihad Al Jaber faces up to ten years in prison for an attempt to smuggle firearms into Iraq, the US Department of Justice said in a release on Tuesday.

"An Iraqi national has appeared in US District Court in Savannah after his indictment on charges related to the attempted smuggling of firearms to Iraq," the release said. "The smuggling charge carries upon conviction a penalty of up to ten years in prison and substantial financial penalties." The Justice Department said Al Jaber attempted to export three handguns and six long-range rifles in a shipment to Iraq by describing the contents as spare auto parts with no license required.

Al Jaber has been charged with smuggling, failure to notify a common carrier and submitting false or misleading export information, the release also said.

The seizure of the shipment is a result of the diligent work of Customs and Border Protection at the Port of Savannah, the release added.

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US Govt. Approves Stryker Vehicles Sale to Macedonia - Defense Security Agency

WASHINGTON, March 16 (Sputnik) - The US Department of State has approved the sale of more than 50 Stryker infantry carrying military vehicles to Macedonia, a NATO member state, the Defense Security Cooperation Agency (DSCA) announced in a press release on Tuesday. "The State Department has made a determination approving a possible Foreign Military Sale to the government of North Macedonia of Stryker Vehicles and related equipment for an estimated cost of \$210 million," the release stated.

The DSCA delivered the required certification notifying the US Congress of the possible sale also on Tuesday, the release said. The principal contractor for the deal will be General Dynamics Land Systems (GDLS) and the vehicles will be produced at GDLS-Canada in London, Ontario, the release also said.

The Macedonian government has requested the possible sale of 54 Stryker Vehicles, to include M1126 Infantry Carrier Vehicles, M1130 Command Vehicles and M1129 Mortar Carrier Vehicles, the release added.

The sales package will also include M2A1 machine guns; M6 smoke grenade launchers and associated spares; Harris radios; common remote operated weapons station ; defense advanced GPS receiver; AN/VAS-5 driver's vision enhancer and spare parts and components, according to the release.

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US Earmarks \$18Mln For Particle Accelerator Technology Research, Training - Energy Dept.

WASHINGTON, March 16 (Sputnik) – US universities and national laboratories will receive an additional \$18 billion for research with sub-atomic particle accelerators - a critical tool in past scientific and medical discoveries, the Energy Department said on Tuesday.

"Accelerator-based technologies are all around us, from new medical therapies to ways to make solar panels — and we've only scratched the surface of their potential," Energy Secretary Jennifer Granholm said in a press release.

Particle accelerators produce beams of charged particles such as electrons and protons – a technology that is used in medical imaging and cancer therapy, semiconductor manufacturing and clean-energy technologies such as solar panels, the release said.

The funding package includes up to \$6 million to advance particle research for medical, energy, industrial, and security applications, the release added.

Another \$7 million will be awarded by the Energy Department's Office of Nuclear Physics for research to improve accelerator performance, the release said.

An additional \$5 million will fund university-based training programs for the next generation of particle physicists, according to the release.

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US Lawmakers Urge IRS to Extend Tax Filing Deadline Due to Pandemic - Letter

WASHINGTON, March 16 (Sputnik) – More than 100 members of the US Congress have called on the Internal Revenue Service to extend the April 15 tax filing deadline due to the continued financial stress Americans experience from the coronavirus pandemic, a letter showed on Tuesday.

"We write to urge you to extend the impending April 15th federal tax filing and payment deadline," Representatives Jamie Raskin and Bill Pascrell Jr wrote in a letter signed by 100 other members of the House. "Almost a year later, we are still grappling with the massive economic, logistical and health challenges wrought by this devastating pandemic. Millions of stressed-out taxpayers, businesses and preparers would appreciate an extension of the deadline to file their 2020 tax returns."

Congress, with the bipartisan support of both the Democratic and Republican parties, extended the deadline for 2019 tax filing by three months last year to July 15.

The lawmakers noted that taxpayers needed time to understand changes to their tax liability if any from multiple COVID-19 relief bills approved since last year, the latest being the Biden's administration \$1.9 trillion "American Rescue Plan."

The Internal Revenue Service also did not begin the 2020 filing season until February 12, 2021, nearly three weeks later than usual, creating a lot less time for constituents and businesses to file taxes overall, they said.

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At Least 50 House Democrats Call on Biden to Cut Defense Budget

WASHINGTON, March 16 (Sputnik) - Fifty House Democrats in a letter on Tuesday called on US President Joe Biden to make significant cuts to the defense budget amid fears the White House plans to request the same level of spending as last year.

"You have spoken frequently about the need to not only reject the destruction of Trumpism, but to build things back better... Therefore, we strongly urge you to request a reduced Pentagon budget when you send your Fiscal Year 2022 budget to Congress," the letter said.

Significant cuts, the lawmakers added, can be achieved without reducing the support, pay or benefits provided to troops.

The letter was led by Defense Spending Reduction Caucus co-chairs Representatives Barbara Lee and Mark Pocan.

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Canada Health Chief Calls 3,600 COVID-19 Variants Detected 'Tip of Iceberg'

TORONTO, March 16 (Sputnik) – The number of COVID-19 variant cases in Canada is likely much higher than what has been detected by public health officials, Chief Public Health Officer Dr. Theresa Tam said on Tuesday.

Canada has recorded over 3,600 variant cases as of Tuesday, with 90 percent of those being attributed to the variant first identified in the United Kingdom, according to Tam, who noted that these are the cases that have been identified through genome sequencing.

"There are, in fact, many more cases where we suspect that they are cases of variant of concern because they contain these mutations," Tam told reporters. "The 3,600 is kind of a tip of the iceberg."

Tam elaborated that there are many more mutations "underneath" what provincial health authorities are screening for.

Tam added that Canada is in a precarious position amid fears of a third wave, with the province of Ontario seeing a growing caseload. More than half of all new cases in Ontario – 53 percent – are attributed to new variants, according to the province's COVID-19 Science Advisory Table. Commenting on the situation in Ontario, Tam said that the province stands at an inflection point and urged local health authorities get the situation under control, while that opportunity exists. As of Tuesday, Canadian health officials have logged over 915,000 coronavirus cases and at least 22,500 virus-related deaths.

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Schumer Tells Senate Democrats to Work With Republicans on Bipartisan Bill Targeting China

WASHINGTON, March 16 (Sputnik) - The chairs of multiple Senate committees have been instructed to work with Republican colleagues on legislation promoting an American edge over China in new and existing technologies such as semiconductors, robotics and advanced communications, Majority Leader Chuck Schumer said on Tuesday.

"On the China bill, we have good bipartisan support," Schumer told reporters. "The centerpiece is a bipartisan proposal, the Endless Frontiers Act, proposed by myself and [Republican Senator] Todd Young."

While the legislation is still being written in multiple committees, the Endless Frontiers Act introduced by Schumer and Young last year would establish a new US Directorate for Technology, create a regional technology hub program and mandate periodic reports on economic security, as well as ongoing research and innovation.

The Schumer-Young legislation contains an "initial list" of 10 "Key Technology Focus Areas," including semiconductors, biotechnology, quantum computing and cybersecurity – areas where the US faces stiff competition from China.

Schumer said Senate Democrats have yet to decide which legislative priority to tackle next, with immigration reform another possibility.

However, media reports suggest that China legislation presents an attractive option for gauging the willingness of Senate Republicans to work with Democrats on some issues - especially with passage of the \$1.9 trillion American Rescue Plan without a single Republican vote.

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US to Test Long-Range Discrimination Radar in Alaska Next Month - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, March 16 (Sputnik) - The United States will begin testing its long-range ballistic missile defense radar in Alaska in April, Northern Command and North American Defense Command (NORAD) chief General Glen VanHerck said on Tuesday.

"With regards to radar in Alaska, the long-range discrimination is on track. Next month, we'll begin initial testing capability," VanHerck said. "I look forward to the initial operational capability in September."

In August, Lockheed Martin said the US Missile Defense Agency (MDA) has started to erect long-range radar panels in its new facility in the US state of Alaska.

In July, the US Air Force said in a report that the United States plans to counter growing threats to its interests in the Arctic by upgrading systems to detect enemy missiles with over-the-horizon radar and satellite surveillance, while responding to threats with fifth-generation aircraft such as the F-35 at bases in Alaska and possibly Greenland,.

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US Approves Sale of Javelin Missiles to Norway, Training for Netherlands - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, March 16 (Sputnik) - The US State Department approved the sale of Javelin missiles to Norway and \$310 million in pilot training on AH-64 Apache helicopters with The Netherlands, the Defense Security Cooperation Agency (DSCA) said on Tuesday.

"The State Department has made a determination approving a possible Foreign Military Sale to the Government of Norway of [20] Javelin FGM-148 Missiles and related equipment for an estimated cost of \$36 million," the release said. "The DSCA delivered the required certification notifying Congress of this possible sale today."

The State Department also approved two pilot military training agreements on AH-64 Apache helicopters worth a combined total of \$310 million with the Netherlands, the DSCA said in two further press releases.

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US Envoy Khalilzad 'Encouraged' All Sides Sending Delegates to Afghan Talks - Statement

WASHINGTON, March 16 (Sputnik) - US Special Envoy Zalmay Khalilzad on Tuesday said he is encouraged that all political leaders in Kabul support and will participate in the upcoming talks in Moscow

On Thursday, Russia will host a conference with all Afghan warring parties which is expected to build upon the Doha talks. Khalilzad has confirmed he will attend the talks in Moscow while China and Pakistan are also expected to send delegates.

"I was encouraged by the fact that all political figures endorse efforts to accelerate the peace process and have agreed to attend or send delegates to upcoming international engagements for a lasting political settlement and permanent ceasefire," Khalilzad said via Twitter.

The envoy said he just wrapped up two days of meetings in Kabul with Afghan leaders and advocates of civil rights.

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US State Dept. Says Moscow Conference on Afghanistan Does Not Replace Doha Talks

WASHINGTON, March 16 (Sputnik) - The Moscow conference on Afghanistan does not replace ongoing negotiations in Doha, State Department Deputy Spokesperson Jalina Porter said on Tuesday.

"As far as the meeting in Moscow, it's correct, [US Representative for Afghanistan Zalmay Khalilzad] he plans to travel on March 18 to this meeting, but let's just be clear, this doesn't replace other ongoing talks in Doha," Porter said in a conference call.

Russia will host the conference on Afghanistan on Thursday with Afghan warring parties. China and Pakistan are also expected to send their delegations to Moscow.

A Qatari official told Sputnik earlier in the day that the Moscow conference is expected to build upon the comprehensive intra-Afghan negotiations in the Qatari capital of Doha, and the historic agreement between the United States and the Taliban radical movement in particular.

US-assisted talks between the Afghan government and the Taliban insurgency on ending the war stalled this year amid unabated militant attacks. The United States was poised to withdraw troops from the country by May but now insists that a durable political settlement must first be achieved as the new administration reviews understandings reached by its predecessors.

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US Intelligence Report Finds China Did Not Deploy Interference Efforts in 2020 Election

WASHINGTON, March 16 (Sputnik) - US intelligence found that China did not make efforts to meddle in the 2020 presidential election, the National Intelligence Council said in a report on Tuesday.

"We assess that China did not deploy interference efforts and considered but did not deploy influence efforts intended to outcome of the US Presidential election," the report said. The report said China seeks stability in its relationship with the United States and did not view either election outcome as being advantageous enough. However, China did use targeted economic measures, including lobbying and other more traditional tools, to influence the election, it added.

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US Intel Report Alleges Iran Carried Out Campaign to Undercut Trump Re-Election Prospects

WASHINGTON, March 16 (Sputnik) - US intelligence alleged in its new report that Iran carried out a campaign to undercut former President Donald Trump's re-election prospects during the 2020 vote.

"We assess that Iran carried out a multi-pronged covert influence campaign intended to undercut former President Trump's reelection prospects," said the report revealed by the National Intelligence Council on Tuesday.

Tehran did not promote Trump's rivals directly, the report added. US intelligence also assessed that Cuba, Venezuela, as well as Hezbollah "took some steps" to influence the election.

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Biden Admin. Confirms Plans to Use Dallas Convention Center to House Migrant Children

WASHINGTON, March 16 (Sputnik) - The US Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) will utilize a convention center in Dallas, Texas, to hold asylum-seeking migrant children who are arriving in overwhelming numbers at the US-Mexico border, a spokesperson said in a statement to Sputnik on Tuesday.

"The US Department of Health and Human Services' (HHS) aggressively works with its interagency partners to ensure that unaccompanied migrant children (UC) are safe and unified with family members or other suitable sponsors as quickly and safely as possible. To support this effort, HHS has selected the Kay Bailey Hutchison Convention Center in Dallas to serve as an Emergency Intake Site beginning on or around, Wednesday, March 17," the statement said.

The convention center will provide needed space to hold migrant children while they are processed and transferred to a sponsor or long-term federal care facility, the statement said. At the convention center, HHS will provide migrant children with clean and comfortable sleeping quarters, meals, toiletries, laundry, and access to medical services, including coronavirus screening, the statement said.

The use of the Dallas convention center will help decrease over-crowding at US border facilities, the statement said.

US media reported on Monday that the facility will be used to hold up to 3,000 migrant children. Last week, a HHS spokesperson told Sputnik that a total of 8,800 migrant children who came to the United States alone are in federal care facilities.

Data from US Customs and Border Protection shows 9,457 unaccompanied migrant children were apprehended at the southern border in February, which is a substantial increase from the 5,858 unaccompanied migrant children apprehended in January. At least 29,729 migrant children have been apprehended at the US-Mexico border in the period from October to February.

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US Will Announce Soon States With Which Would Share Excess Coronavirus Vaccines - Biden

WASHINGTON, March 16 (Sputnik) - The United States is in discussions with various nations on sharing its excess supply of coronavirus vaccines and will announce the list of recipients soon, President Joe Biden said on Tuesday.

"We're talking to several countries already. We'll let you know that very shortly," Biden told reporters before embarking on a chopper ride to Pennsylvania to tout the \$1.9 trillion COVID-19 relief bill he signed into law last week.

Biden's comments came after the United States partnered last week with Japan, India and Australia to expand global vaccine manufacturing capacity. The plan entailed the Biden administration committing to provide financial support for Biological E, a major vaccine manufacturer in India that will produce at least 1 billion doses of coronavirus vaccines by the end of 2022.

The effort seeks to partly mitigate the vaccine shortage in Southeast Asia and beyond while the Biden administration tries to immunize Americans first with the supplies it has before exporting any excess.

As of Friday, 13.5 percent of people in the United States who are 18 or older have been fully vaccinated, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention said.

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US Has No Indications Foreign Actors Tried to Alter Voting Process in 2020 - Intel Report

WASHINGTON, March 16 (Sputnik) - US intelligence found no indications that foreign actors attempted to alter voting processes during the 2020 election, a report revealed on Tuesday. "We have no indications that any foreign actor attempted to alter any technical aspect of the voting process in 2020 US elections, including voting registration, casting ballots, vote tabulation, or reporting results," the report from the National Intelligence Council said.

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UN Studying UK Strategy to Boost Nuclear Arsenal - Spokesman

UNITED NATIONS, March 16 (Sputnik) - The United Nations is currently examining the UK's new defense strategy which announced the country will raise the number of nuclear warheads in its stockpile, UN spokesperson Stephane Dujarric said in a press briefing on Tuesday. Earlier in the day, the Integrated Review of Security, Defense, Development and Foreign Policy said the United Kingdom will bolster its nuclear weapon stockpile to 260 warheads in light of the "evolving security environment."

"We're aware of the release of the media reports on the Integrated Strategic Review. I know the report is currently public, and we're studying its contents at this point," Dujarric said.

When asked whether UN Chief Antonio Guterres will be disappointed if the United Kingdom, a state party to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons, moves to increase its nuclear arsenal, the spokesman said Guterres will continue to call for the elimination of nuclear weapons.

"The Secretary-General's position is that he has always and will continue to call for a world free of nuclear weapons, and that was his position yesterday, and that will be his position today and tomorrow," Dujarric said.

According to a recent analysis by the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, the UK's nuclear arsenal consists of about 215 warheads, including 120 deployed on intercontinental missiles and at heavy bomber bases.

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US Intel Report Alleges Putin Authorized Russian Government to Undermine Biden in Election

WASHINGTON, March 16 (Sputnik) - US intelligence alleged that Russian President Vladimir Putin authorized the Russian government to undermine Joe Biden during the 2020 election in the United States, the National Intelligence Council said in a report on Tuesday.

"We assess that... Putin authorized, and a range of Russian government organizations conducted, influence operations aimed at denigrating President Biden's candidacy and the Democratic Party, supporting former President [Donald] Trump, undermining public confidence in the electoral process, and exacerbating sociopolitical divisions in the US," the report said.

The US intelligence community also determined there were no "persistent" Russian efforts to gain access to election infrastructure, the report added.

Russian officials have repeatedly denied US accusations of election meddling as absurd attempts to demonize Russia and divert attention from actual cases of fraud and political corruption.

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Virginia Restores Civil Rights to Prisoners Upon Completing Sentences - Governor

WASHINGTON, March 16 (Sputnik) - Virginia Governor Ralph Northam has restored the civil rights to more than 69,000 residents who serve or have served prison sentences, among which the right to vote, the Office of the Governor said in a release on Tuesday.

"Governor Ralph Northam today restored the civil rights of more than 69,000 Virginians using new eligibility criteria that mirror a proposed change to the Constitution of Virginia that would automatically restore voting rights to individuals upon completion of their sentence of incarceration," the release said. "With today's announcement, Governor Northam has restored civil rights to more than 111,000 people since he took office."

Virginia is one of the three US states where citizens with past felony convictions lose their civil rights, including the right to vote, serve on a jury, run for office, become public notary and carry a firearm, the release said. The governor has the sole discretion to restore those civil rights, it added.

"Too many of our laws were written during a time of open racism and discrimination, and they still bear the traces of inequity," Northam was quoted as saying in the release. "We are a Commonwealth that believes in moving forward, not being tied down by the mistakes of our past. If we want people to return to our communities and participate in society, we must welcome them back fully - and this policy does just that."

In 2021, the General Assembly approved a constitutional amendment that automatically restores the civil rights of any individual upon completing a prison sentence, the release said. The amendment has to be passed one more time in 2022 before going for a vote in a referendum.

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Canada's COVID-19 Case Count on Rise After Weeks of Plateau - Chief Medical Officer

TORONTO, March 16 (Sputnik) - Canada is again seeing an increasing number of coronavirus cases following weeks of cases plateauing, Chief Public Health Officer Dr. Theresa Tam said on Tuesday.

"Over the past several weeks, COVID-19 activity plateaued at a high level, with national case counts now on the rise," Tam told reporters.

In the past seven days the country recorded an average of 3,200 new infections and 31 virus-related deaths, Tam added. The daily average of new cases is up nearly 10 percent since the start of March, while deaths declined by 35 percent.

Tam attributed the decreased fatality rate to increased vaccination rates among high-risk populations, most notably seniors, and to a lack of outbreaks in long-term care facilities. In the early days of the pandemic Canadian health officials estimated that up to 80 percent of all of the country's fatalities were attributed to outbreaks in care facilities.

As of Tuesday, Canadian health officials have logged over 915,000 coronavirus cases and at least 22,500 virus-related deaths.

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US State Dept. Says Moscow Conference on Afghanistan Does Not Replace Doha Talks

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US National Security Adviser, EU Counterparts Discuss Afghanistan, Russia - White House

WASHINGTON, March 16 (Sputnik) - US National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan discussed Russia, Afghanistan and Iran in a phone conversation with European counterparts from France, Germany and the UK, White House National Security Council spokesperson Emily Horne said on Tuesday.

"The four national security advisers... discussed shared priorities with respect to Afghanistan, Iran, Libya, Ukraine, and Russia," Horne said in a statement.

Sullivan underscored the US commitment to working closely with European Allies and previewed the March 18 meeting he and Secretary of State Tony Blinken will hold with Chinese officials, she added.

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China Targeting US West Coast Mobilization Centers With New Weapons - General

WASHINGTON, March 16 (Sputnik) - China is developing precision weapons to target US military logistical centers on the West Coast and a new generation of hypersonic weapons, Northern Command and North American Defense Command (NORAD) chief General Glen VanHerck told the Senate on Tuesday.

"In the foreseeable future, China will likely be able to augment its cyber-attack capabilities with a new family of long-range precision-strike weapons capable of targeting key logistical nodes on the US West Coast that support US mobilization and sustainment," the general said in written testimony to the Senate Armed Services Committee (SASC).

He also said China is also developing hypersonic potential first strike weapons as part of a new generation of technological and military advances "that will further diversify their nuclear strike options and potentially increase the risks associated with US intervention in a contingency." In any crisis, China is postured to transition rapidly from cyber exploitation to cyber attack in a bid to frustrate the US ability to flow forces across the Pacific and globally, the general added.

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UN Hopes US, China Find Ways to Cooperate on Global Issues at Alaska Meeting

UNITED NATIONS, March 16 (Sputnik) - The United Nations hopes that the first meeting of US Secretary of State Antony Blinken and Chinese State Councilor Wang Yi later this week will help the two countries to find ways to cooperate on critical global challenges, including the post-COVID-19 reconstruction and climate change, UN spokesperson Stephane Dujarric said in a press briefing on Tuesday.

"We hope for a positive outcome. We hope that China and the United States can find ways to collaborate on critical issues, notably on climate change, on rebuilding the post-COVID world," Dujarric said.

At the same time, the United Nations recognizes the existence of tensions between the two countries, Dujarric also said.

"We fully understand that there are tensions and outstanding issues between the two, but they should also both find ways to cooperate on the biggest global challenges that are before us," Dujarric added.

On March 18, Blinken and National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan will travel to Alaska to meet with China's Central Commission Office for Foreign Affairs Director Yang Jiechi and the State Councilor and discuss US-China bilateral relations.

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US Lawmakers Introduce Measure for \$12Bln Increase in Foreign Affairs Budget - Statement

WASHINGTON, March 16 (Sputnik) - US Senator Chris Murphy and several other Democrat lawmakers proposed legislation on Tuesday that would increase the United States' foreign affairs budget by \$12 billion in 2022 in order to maintain a strong military and to better compete with China.

"We must maintain the strongest military on the planet, but we have to get smarter about the national security challenges that can only be met with non-military solutions," Murphy said in a press release. "That's why we are proposing a \$12 billion increase to the international affairs budget, and unveiling a blueprint for how to spend this increased funding in a way that allows us to respond to the pressing challenges ahead: competing with China on the world stage, shoring up our defenses to stop the next pandemic, and fighting climate change."

The bill is sponsored by Murphy, Senator Chris Van Hollen, Congressman David Cicilline and Congressman Ami Bera.

The current foreign affairs budget is \$56.6 billion and lawmakers are proposing to increase funding to \$68.7 billion for State Department and USAID programs overseas, the release said. According to a fact sheet of the legislation, the increase in spending would seek to strengthen economic and commercial diplomacy as a means to counter China's trade and investment practices.

The measure also would boost developing countries' preparedness for the next pandemic, increase American visibility of emerging health threats, and invest in multilateral vaccine development and distribution, the release said.

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US Views Russia Greater Information Threat Than China - Intelligence Official

WASHINGTON, March 16 (Sputnik) - The United States sees Russia as its biggest information warfare threat with China ranking second, but with greater capabilities for technological advances, US Defense Intelligence Officer for Cyber James Sullivan told a Congressional panel on Tuesday.

"Russia is without a question ahead because they are a lot more prolific and they are a lot more destructive... They are much more aggressive in terms of trying to undermine US democracy and degrade social cohesion in the United States. China is not necessarily up to that," Sullivan said during a hearing at the House Subcommittee on Intelligence and Special Operations.

He added that Russia has a much more massive global presence, but China also seeks to expand its reach and is likely to use machine learning and AI faster than the Russians will do it.

"I think it's Russia that is changing the climate and I think it's China that is introducing bad weather," Sullivan described the current situation.

When asked about the hierarchy of threats in the information domain, he put Russia first and China second followed by Iran and North Korea.

Russian officials have repeatedly denied allegations of interfering in US domestic affairs.

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UN Chief Calls for Lowering Rhetorical Tensions Between US, North Korea - Spokesman

UNITED NATIONS, March 16 (Sputnik) - UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres wishes to see a de-escalation of rhetorical tensions between the United States and North Korea and re-engagement of the key players on the matter to find a diplomatic solution forward, UN spokesperson Stephane Dujarric told reporters on Tuesday.

Kim Yo Jong, the sister of North Korean leader Kim Jong Un, earlier in the day, warned US President Joe Biden to "refrain from causing a stink" on the Korean Peninsula, referring to the joint US and South Korean military drills in the region.

"The Secretary General's position on [the] situation [on the] Korean peninsula remains the same: he wants dialogue, he wants to see a denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula, he wants to see tensions lowered, whether those tensions are military or rhetorical tensions. We would want to see re-engagement of the major players... to find a diplomatic solution forward," Dujarric said.

Kim Yo Jong, an influential member of the North Korean Workers' Party, said her country was mulling tearing up a 2018 military pact with the South in response to the exercise, which Seoul says does not involve field training. The drills are expected to run through Thursday.

On Monday, White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki confirmed that the US had reached out to North Korea but received no response amid policy review. South Korea's Ministry of Unification reported that Seoul and Washington had been in contact over the issue and held regular consultations.

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Pentagon Believes North Korea May Test ICBM in 'Near Future' - US General

WASHINGTON, March 16 (Sputnik) - North Korea may soon seek to test a new intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM), US Northern Command and North American Defense Command (NORAD) chief General Glen VanHerck said in written testimony to the Senate Armed Services Committee on Tuesday.

"The North Korean regime has also indicated that it is no longer bound by the unilateral nuclear and ICBM testing moratorium announced in 2018, suggesting that Kim Jong Un may begin flight testing an improved ICBM design in the near future," VanHerck said.

On Monday, the White House said US officials tried to reach out to North Korea but had received no response. The State Department said the outreach through various channels was intended to "reduce the risk of escalation."

The Kim Jong Un regime has already achieved "alarming success" in its efforts to demonstrate the capability to threaten the US homeland with nuclear-armed ICBMs, the general said. North Korea leader Kim Jung Un believes "such weapons are necessary to deter US military action and ensure his regime's survival," VanHerck said.

The general also said that in 2017 North Korea successfully tested a thermonuclear device increasing the destructive potential of their strategic weapons by an order of magnitude as well as three ICBMs capable of reaching the United States. And in October 2020, Pyongyang unveiled a new considerably larger ICBM, he added.

On Tuesday, Kim's sister and the vice department director of the Central Committee of the Workers' Party of Korea (WPK), condemned US-South Korean military drills as running contrary to Seoul's rapprochement efforts and warned Washington not to meddle "if it wants to sleep in peace for coming four years."

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Biden Approval Rating Hits 57% With Passage of \$1.9Trln COVID-19 Relief Bill - Poll

WASHINGTON, March 16 (Sputnik) - President Joe Biden received a 4 point bounce in his job approval rating with the passage \$1.9 trillion American Rescue Act, reversing a modest decline in recent weeks, a new Rasmussen poll revealed on Tuesday.

"Fifty-seven percent (57 percent) of voters now approve of the way President Biden is performing his job," a press release explaining the poll said. "As a result, Biden's overall approval rating is unchanged from a month ago."

Following last week's passage of the COVID-19 relief bill, approval of the president rose four points from a week earlier, mirroring declines over the preceding month, the release said.

Biden received a vote of confidence from 92 percent of Democrats, 52 percent of independents and 23 percent of Republicans, the release added.

Some 37 percent disapproved of Biden's job performance, and 7 percent said they were unsure, according to the release.

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Humanitarian Response Plan for Northeast Nigeria Seeks \$1Bln for 2021 - OCHA

UNITED NATIONS, March 16 (Sputnik) - The humanitarian community launched a \$1 billion Humanitarian Response Plan to address needs in northeast Nigeria in 2021, the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) said in a statement on Tuesday.

"The plan requests US\$1 billion to enable partners to provide critical services to the 6.4 million most vulnerable people - amongst a total of 8.7 million people in need of some form of humanitarian assistance in 2021," the statement said.

The UN agency explained that longstanding insecurity, violence, climate change and the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic have worsened the humanitarian situation for almost nine million people, nearly two of whom are internally displaced and up to 5.1 million are facing hunger in the lean season.

With the funding requested, the humanitarian community aims to provide life-saving assistance and improve the living conditions in displacement camps.

OCHA also said it expected the humanitarian crisis in Nigeria's north-eastern states of Borno, Adamawa and Yobe to persist unabated throughout 2021, with the armed conflict having no "clear end in sight."

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Number of Americans Perceiving China as Main Threat to US More Than Doubles - Poll

WASHINGTON, March 16 (Sputnik) - The number of adult Americans who perceive China to be main threat to the United States has more than doubled since last year and those who view Russia as the main threat has increased only marginally, a new Gallup poll revealed on Tuesday.

According to the poll results, 45 percent of Americans today say China is the greatest threat to the United States, or more than double who said so in 2020. Twenty-six percent of respondents said Russia is the main threat to the United States, an increase of 3 percent from a year ago and down 32 percent from the poll results in 2019.

Gallup said the change in perception coincides with the time frame of the coronavirus pandemic, which originated in China and has had a severe impact on the global economy and human activity.

In addition, the poll results reveal that 63 percent of Americans see China's economic power as a critical threat in the next ten years.

Gallup said it noted a significant partisan divide among Americans in their perceptions of which country is the greatest threat to the United States, with 76 percent Republicans naming China and 47 percent Democrats citing Russia.

Earlier this month, another survey by the Pew Research Center revealed that 89 percent of adult Americans see China as a competitor or an enemy rather than a partner and support a tougher US stance regarding the alleged human rights abuses in that country and economic practices.

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Canada's COVID-19 Case Count on Rise After Weeks of Plateau - Chief Medical Officer

TORONTO, March 16 (Sputnik) - Canada is again seeing an increasing number of coronavirus cases following weeks of cases plateauing, Chief Public Health Officer Dr. Theresa Tam said on Tuesday.

"Over the past several weeks, COVID-19 activity plateaued at a high level, with national case counts now on the rise," Tam told reporters.

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Some 140 Stranded Ethiopian Migrants Return From Yemen on Humanitarian Flight - IOM
WASHINGTON, March 16 (Sputnik) - A humanitarian flight carrying 140 stranded Ethiopian migrants arrived in Addis Ababa from Yemen on Tuesday in the first trip of its kind since the pandemic began, the International Organization for Migration (IOM) said in a release.

"One hundred forty Ethiopian migrants stranded in Yemen arrived in Addis Ababa today, the first Voluntary Humanitarian Return (VHR) program flight the International Organization for Migration (IOM) has facilitated between the two countries since the COVID-19 global pandemic was declared," the release said.

The government of Ethiopia visited Aden and verified the nationality of 1,100 out of more than 6,000 Ethiopian migrants who are willing to return home while thousands of other migrants remain stranded elsewhere in Yemen, including Ma'rib, the IOM noted.

Unable to get to Saudi Arabia, migrants get stranded in Yemen where they face xenophobia, exploitation and detention over the last year since the global pandemic began, the release added.

According to IOM, migrants often take a risk and use smuggling networks to return to the Horn of Africa on overcrowded boats resulting in incidents like earlier this month when 20 migrants drowned after smugglers threw them overboard during their journey from Djibouti to Yemen. Ethiopian refugees have traveled to Saudi Arabia via Yemen after an armed conflict broke out in Ethiopia's Tigray region last November.

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Pentagon Views Russia as 'Most Acute Challenge' in Northern Command Region - Commander

WASHINGTON, March 16 (Sputnik) - The United States considers Russia to be the "most acute challenge" in the Northern Command (NORTHCOM) area of responsibility, NORTHCOM commander Gen. Glen VanHerck said on Tuesday.

"Russia presents a persistent, proximate threat to the United States and Canada and remains the most acute challenge to our homeland defense mission," VanHerck said in a written testimony before the US Senate Armed Services Committee.

VanHerc said Russia seek to erode US influence and increase its own dominance in the region, particularly off the coast of Alaska.

"Last year, NORAD [North American Aerospace Defense Command] responded to more Russian military flights off the coast of Alaska than we've seen in any year since the end of the Cold War," he said. "These Russian military operations include multiple flights of heavy bombers, anti-submarine aircraft, and intelligence collection platforms near Alaska." VanHerck said these efforts show Russia's military reach and its capabilities to conduct potential strikes against the United States. Russia is also increasingly conducting military exercises on its own territory, including on the Chukotka Peninsula, close to the US border, he added.

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Pentagon Wary of Russia's Expanding Influence in South America - SOCOM Commander

WASHINGTON, March 16 (Sputnik) - The Department of Defense views Russia's rising influence in South America as a threat to the national security of the United States and closely tracks Moscow's activities in the region, US Southern Command (SOCOM) chief Adm. Craig Faller said on Tuesday.

"Russia is actively engaging in this region to counter what it views as the US meddling in its near-abroad. Expanding air and sea access to project military power, it has agreements with Venezuela and Nicaragua that allow Russian warships to visit on short notice," Faller said in a written testimony before the Senate Armed Services Committee.

Feller noted that Russia has increased its military presence in the region since 2008 by deploying strategic bombers and making port calls.

"Russia doubled its naval deployments in this region, going from five (2008-2014), to 11 (2015-2020)," he said.

In addition, Faller accused Russia as well as China, of using so-called "medical diplomacy" and using the current coronavirus pandemic to pursue its interests.

"COVID-19 has also provided Russia with another avenue by which to expand its campaign to outcompete the United States in the information domain," Feller said.

SOCOM has recently released an updated map of Russian influence in Latin America noting that Moscow provides military training assistance to 17 of the 31 states in the region. The US has seen the deployment of three strategic bombers, more than 40 port calls and 23 visits by head of state between Russia and regional countries.

US military also consider Russian media presence in the region to be an aspect of influence, noting that more than 489 articles allegedly distorting the US defense engagements since 2018 have been written.

Russia has repeatedly refuted the US accusations of attempting to increase its military presence in Latin America.

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US Retail Sales Down 3% in February - Commerce Dept.

WASHINGTON, March 16 (Sputnik) - Retail sales in the United States fell 3 percent in the month of February, US Commerce Department data revealed on Tuesday.

"Advance estimates of US retail and food services sales for January 2021, adjusted for seasonal variation and holiday and trading-day differences, but not for price changes, were \$561.7 billion, a decrease of 3 percent from the previous month," the Bureau of Census, an unit within the Commerce Department, said .

Retail sales increased 5.3 percent in January, helped by stimulus checks of \$600 per individual sent out in December under the Trump administration's final COVID-19 relief program of \$900 billion.

Economists surveyed by US media had said they expected a decline in retail sale in February of just 0.5 percent in February.

The Commerce Department data showed sales fell in every major retail group last month, except for groceries and gasoline, two major household staples. Receipts at grocery stores increased by a marginal 0.1 percent while gas sales rose by 3.6 percent.

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Canada Advisory Committee Now Recommends Using AstraZeneca Vaccine for Seniors

TORONTO, March 16 (Sputnik) - Canada's National Advisory Committee on Immunizations (NACI) said on Tuesday that it is recommending the use of the Oxford-AstraZeneca coronavirus vaccine for Canadian seniors, reversing its guidance from earlier this month.

NACI said on March 1 that it is not recommending AstraZeneca's coronavirus vaccine for Canadians aged 65 and older.

"The recommendation on the use of the AstraZeneca COVID-19 vaccine has been updated to include use in those 65 years of age and older," NACI said in its latest recommendations statement.

NACI said it relied on data from the mass vaccination campaign in the United Kingdom with the AstraZeneca vaccine to reach its conclusion.

Canadian health regulators authorized the AstraZeneca coronavirus vaccine along with the Serum Institute of India version of the vaccine on February 26 for use in individuals over the age of 18.

Despite use of the vaccine being halted in at least a dozen countries, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau said on Monday that he trusts the scrupulous work done by his country's health regulators before authorizing the AstraZeneca vaccine and urged Canadians to receive the first vaccine offered to them amid reports that some citizens are refusing to be immunized with the UK drugmaker's vaccine.

France, Germany, Italy and a host of other nations have suspended the use of the AstraZeneca vaccine after citizens reported side-effects following inoculation from the vaccine's ABV5300 batch. The batch in question was distributed among 17 EU countries.

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Myanmar Unrest Leads to Surge in Food, Fuel Prices - World Food Program

UNITED NATIONS, March 16 (Sputnik) - The unrest in Myanmar is creating a surge in the prices of food and fuel in the country, the World Food Program (WFP) said on Tuesday. "WFP's food price monitoring shows that food prices are trending upwards in some urban areas, with the retail price of palm oil up 20 percent since the start of February in the peri-urban areas of the main city Yangon," the UN agency said in a statement.

The cost of rice across Myanmar increased 3 percent on average at monitored markets from mid-January to mid-February, while the cost of fuel increased 15 percent since February. The surging food and fuel prices are compounded by the near paralysis of the banking sector, slowdowns in remittances and widespread limits on cash availability, the statement said. WFP said it was building a contingency food stock to assist some 360,000 people that would allow a switch from cash to in-kind food assistance in case cash availability continues to be limited or market supply is constrained.

Myanmar has been in a state of unrest since February 1, when the country's military overthrew the civilian government and arrested State Counselor Aung San Suu Kyi and President Win Myint, declaring a year-long state of emergency.

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US Engagement Can Boost Yemen Peace Prospects if Backed by Relevant Steps - Nebenzia

UNITED NATIONS, March 16 (Sputnik) - Russia believes that the US engagement in Yemen can increase the prospects for a peaceful settlement in that country if backed by appropriate steps, Russian Permanent Representative to the United Nations Vassily Nebenzia said on Tuesday.

"Encouraging signals have been coming in from Washington lately: we refer to the reversal of the decision to designate the Houthi movement as a terrorist organization, as well as the stated intention of the new US administration to actively engage in efforts to end the conflict as soon as possible," Nebenzia told the UN Security Council.

"If such a constructive approach is backed by relevant practical steps, the chances of restoring along the way to peace and stability in Yemen will objectively increase," Nebenzia said.

In January, the previous US administration of President Donald Trump designated the rebel Houthi movement in Yemen as a foreign terrorist organization. Following calls from the UN senior officials, including the Secretary-General, to reverse the decision, the designation was removed a month after by the new US administration of President Joe Biden. Biden announced in February that the war in Yemen must end, retracted US support for any offensive military operations in the country and appointed veteran diplomat Timothy Lenderking as his special envoy for Yemen.

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US Marines, Navy Seals Rehearse Close Air Support in Arctic Exercise With NATO Allies

WASHINGTON, March 16 (Sputnik) - US Marines, Navy Seals and Norwegian Soldiers practiced air traffic control needed for close air support in an Arctic contingency, the Marine Corps said on Tuesday.

"The JTAC [Joint Terminal Attack Controller] integration with foreign allied forces is important as it allows the [Marines] and allied counterparts to learn how to operate together and make accurate calls for fire from supporting combat aircraft in the harsh Arctic climate. During this training, the Marines practiced calling for simulated air strikes from a U.S Air Force B-1B Lancer," the Marine Corps said in a press release.

Allied JTAC forces established a position on top of a mountain and quickly established communications with a B-1B bomber to call in the target points necessary for attacks, the release said.

In addition to US Marines, the training near Setermoen, Norway earlier this month also included Navy Seals and Norwegian special operations forces, the release added.

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UN Rights Office Says at Least 149 Peaceful Protesters Killed by Myanmar Security Forces

UNITED NATIONS, March 16 (Sputnik) - At least 149 peaceful protesters have been killed since the military coup in Myanmar in February as a result of actions by security forces, UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Spokesperson Ravina Shamdasani said in a statement on Tuesday.

"At least 149 people have been arbitrarily deprived of their lives since February 1, as a result of unlawful use of lethal force against peaceful protestors in Myanmar," Shamdasani said. "Of these, at least 11 were killed on Monday, and 57 over the weekend."

Shamdasani said the United Nations had "many more" reports of killings that have not been confirmed yet.

Additionally, more than 2,084 people have been arbitrarily detained, and at least five deaths have occurred in custody, with at least two victims' bodies having shown signs of "severe physical abuse," Shamdassani pointed out.

"We are deeply disturbed that the crackdown continues to intensify, and we again call on the military to stop killing and detaining protestors," she said.

Shamdassani reiterated the call by UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Michelle Bachelet on all actors with influence to take measures to end the state violence against the Myanmar people.

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UN Seeks \$1.2Bln for 2.2Mln South Sudanese Refugees in 5 Neighboring Countries

UNITED NATIONS, March 16 (Sputnik) - An appeal for \$1.2 billion in emergency relief targets 2.2 million South Sudanese refugees in need of life-sustaining aid, the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) said on Tuesday.

"Funding is urgently needed to provide life-sustaining assistance, including shelter, access to safe drinking water, education and health services," UNHCR said in a press release. "Food shortages are particularly acute with insufficient funding already leading to ration cuts impacting hundreds of thousands of refugees."

The appeal targets South Sudanese refugees hosted by five neighboring countries: the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), Ethiopia, Kenya, Sudan and Uganda, the release said.

The latest appeal complements a separate \$1.7 billion South Sudan Humanitarian Response Plan for 2021, which targets 6.6 million people in South Sudan, including about 350,000 internal refugees, the release added.

Last year, South Sudan's warring parties declared an official end to six years of civil war between followers of President Salva Kiir and opposition leader Riek Machar, with the formation of a transitional coalition government.

However, efforts to rebuild have been hit by the COVID-19 pandemic, severe flooding, droughts and swarms of desert locusts, according to UNHCR.

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US on Pace to Encounter More Migrants at Southern Border Than in 20 Years – Mayorkas

WASHINGTON, March 16 (Sputnik) - The United States this year will have apprehended more migrants at its southern border than it has in the last 20 years due a surge in immigration, Homeland Security Secretary Alejandro Mayorkas said on Tuesday.

"The situation at the southwest border is difficult. We are working around the clock to manage it and we will continue to do so," Mayorkas said in a statement. "We are on pace to encounter more individuals on the southwest border than we have in the last 20 years."

Many of the migrants being encountered are unaccompanied children, some of whom are as young as six or seven years old, Mayorkas said. "They are vulnerable children and we have ended the prior administration's practice of expelling them," he said.

Mayorkas said that due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the US is currently expelling most of the single adults and families it encounters, though some exceptions are made in cases involving people with acute vulnerabilities.

Unaccompanied children, meanwhile, are generally transferred to the custody of the Health and Human Services Department within 72 hours of apprehension, he said.

"In more than 80 percent of cases, the child has a family member in the United States. In more than 40 percent of cases, that family member is a parent or legal guardian. These are children being reunited with their families who will care for them," he said.

Mayorkas acknowledged, however, that the 72-hour timeframe for transferring children is not always met because Border Patrol facilities have become overcrowded.

"HHS has not had the capacity to intake the number of unaccompanied children we have been encountering," he said.

He noted however that the administration was standing up additional facilities for migrant children and families in Texas and Arizona, as well as partnering with Mexico to increase capacity to receive expelled families.

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US, Japan Vow to Continue 'Realistic' Joint Military Exercises, Training - Statement

WASHINGTON, March 16 (Sputnik) - The United States and Japan issued a statement on Tuesday in which they pledged to keep on conducting joint "realistic" military exercises and training in order to maintain their alliance's operational readiness and meet future challenges.

"They highlighted the importance of domains such as space and cyber, as well as further strengthening information security," the statement said. "In addition, they reiterated that realistic bilateral and multilateral exercises and training are necessary to maintain the Alliance's operational readiness and deterrent posture, as well as to meet future challenges."

The statement was issued upon the conclusion of US-Japan Security Consultative Committee in Tokyo on earlier on Tuesday by US Secretary of State Blinken, Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin, Japanese Minister for Foreign Affairs Motegi and Minister of Defense Kishi.

"Recognizing the increasingly serious regional security environment, the Ministers recommitted to enhancing close coordination to align security policy, deepen defense cooperation across all domains, and bolster extended deterrence by consulting on Alliance roles, missions, and capabilities," the statement said.

At the end of February, Japan, the United States and France held a joint naval exercise west to the Kyushu island to rehearse in-motion refueling, according to the NHK broadcast report citing Japan's Maritime Self-Defense Force.

On January 22, China passed a law empowering its navy to use force against foreign vessels in the waters that it considers its sovereign, which includes parts of East China Sea under Japan's sovereignty claims. The United States is strongly opposed to China's increased military presence in the disputed waters, considering it a strategic threat to itself and its regional allies.

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Moderna Starts COVID-19 Vaccine Trials for Children Under 12 Years Old - Company Statement

WASHINGTON, March 16 (Sputnik) – Moderna has begin enrolling children under the age of 12 in a new scientific trials aimed at gauging the safety and effectiveness of its vaccine in the younger-age population, the company said on Tuesday.

"The Company intends to enroll approximately 6,750 pediatric participants in the US and Canada ages 6 months to less than 12 years," Moderna said in a press release.

The first participants in the trial have already been dosed in the Phase 2/3 study, called the KidCOVE study, of Moderna's mRNA-1273 vaccine, Moderna said.

The study is being conducted in collaboration with the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases (NIAID) and the Biomedical Advanced Research and Development Authority (BARDA), part of the Department of Health and Human Services, Moderna added.

In Part 1 of the study, each participant ages two years to less than 12 years may receive one of two dose levels (50 µg [micrograms] or 100 µg). Also in Part 1, each participant ages six months to less than 2 years may receive one of three dose levels (25 µg, 50 µg and 100 µg), Moderna said.

Few children under age 18 have died of COVID-19, less than 300. But the group accounted for more than 10 percent of positive tests for coronavirus infection, according to data from the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) and the American Academy of Pediatrics.

Studies attempting to gauge how readily children spread the virus to adults have yielded conflicting results. In addition, some infected children develop a related disease known as Multisystem Inflammatory Syndrome which typically requires hospitalization, although most victims recover, researchers say.

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US, Japan to Boost Information Sharing Related to Cyber Threats - State Dept

WASHINGTON, March 16 (Sputnik) -US Secretary of State Antony Blinken and Japan's Foreign Minister Toshimitsu Motegi pledged to enhance efforts to share information related to cyber threats and collaborate on holding countries accountable for cyberattacks, the State Department said on Tuesday.

Blinken and Motegi met earlier on Tuesday for their first in-person talks in Tokyo. The so-called two-plus-two talks also included the two countries' defense ministers.

"The United States and Japan will strengthen the current US-Japan Cyber Dialogue to redouble our efforts on cooperation and information sharing related to cyber threats, as well as collaboration to hold states accountable when they engage in significant malicious cyber activity that violates the framework for responsible state behavior in cyberspace," the State Department said.

Two countries will also boost collaboration on capacity-building programs for other nations in the Indo-Pacific region, it said.

"Both countries also will work together to advance responsible state behavior in cyberspace in conjunction with like-minded members of the international community," it added.

Washington and Tokyo also committed to strengthening collaboration on climate ambition and decarbonization, and will work towards achieving their 2050 net zero goals, the State Department said.

"Both countries also commit to discussing ways to expand the adoption and deployment of clean energy technologies to regional partners in an affordable and effective manner through close coordination among U.S. and Japanese agencies and the private sector," it added.

The United States and Japan have also vowed to leverage cooperation and enhance their joint response to the pandemic, the release added.

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US, Japan Defense Chiefs Discuss China, Boosting Japanese Capabilities - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, March 16 (Sputnik) - US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin and his Japanese counterpart Nobuo Kishi during a meeting in Tokyo on Tuesday discussed China's expanding activities in the Indo-Pacific region and ways to boost Japan's defense capabilities, Pentagon Press Secretary John Kirby said.

"The two leaders addressed a broad range of defense issues, to include China's growing capabilities and aggressive actions in the East and South China Seas, the threat from North Korean nuclear and missile programs, the importance of Japan's role in regional security, advanced capabilities development, building partner capacity, and enhancing multilateral cooperation," Kirby said in a readout of the meeting.

Austin reaffirmed that Washington would stand firmly opposed to any "unilateral attempts to change the status quo" in the region, including in territories such as the East China Sea and Senkaku Islands, Kirby said. The US defense chief emphasized that the defense treaty between the US and Japan applies to the islands.

"During the meeting, Secretary Austin reaffirmed the importance of the US-Japan Alliance in upholding a free and open Indo-Pacific, and highlighted that the Alliance is the cornerstone of regional security and stability," the readout said. "He also emphasized the need for the Alliance to prepare for long-term challenges."

Over the past several years, China has increased its territorial and maritime claims in the Indo-Pacific region, overlapping with the interests of a number of nations. In particular, Beijing has been locked up in a dispute with Tokyo over a string of uninhabited but resource-rich islets, known as the Senkaku Islands in Japan and the Diaoyu Islands in China.

In addition, Beijing has boosted the scale and frequency of its military drills in the Indo-Pacific, prompting the United States and its regional allies — Japan, India and Australia — to enhance strategic cooperation within the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue in response.

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US, Japan Ministers Share Concerns About China's 'Disruptive' Actions - Joint Statement

WASHINGTON, March 16 (Sputnik) - Senior US and Japanese officials during high-level security talks on Tuesday discussed their shared concerns over what they called China's "disruptive" activities in the Indo-Pacific region, the two countries said in a joint statement. The two sides issued the statement after US Secretary of State Blinken and Secretary of Defense Austin met in Tokyo earlier in the day with their Japanese counterparts Foreign Minister Toshimitsu Motegi and Defense Minister Nobuo Kishi.

"The United States and Japan acknowledged that China's behavior, where inconsistent with the existing international order, presents political, economic, military, and technological challenges to the Alliance and to the international community," the statement said. "The ministers also expressed serious concerns about recent disruptive developments in the region, such as the China Coast Guard law."

The ministers vowed to oppose what they called China's "coercion and destabilizing behavior" toward other Indo-Pacific countries and underlined their support for free commerce and navigation of airs and seas in the region.

The senior US officials also emphasized Washington's commitment to ensuring the defense of Japan's territory, including of the Senakaku Islands. The also voiced objections to China's activities in the South China Sea, Hong Kong and the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region.

"The United States and Japan remain opposed to any unilateral action that seeks to change the status quo or to undermine Japan's administration of these islands," the statement said. "The Ministers underscored the importance of peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait."

In February, China enacted the law that permits China's coast guard to destroy other countries' structures and to use force when defending the country's maritime claims in disputed areas. Over the past several years, China has increased its territorial and maritime claims in the Indo-Pacific region, overlapping with the interests of a number of nations. In particular, Beijing has been locked up in a dispute with Tokyo over a string of uninhabited but resource-rich islets, known as the Senkaku Islands in Japan and the Diaoyu Islands in China.

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US on Pace to Encounter More Migrants at Southern Border Than in 20 Years - Mayorkas

WASHINGTON, March 16 (Sputnik) - The United States this year will have apprehended more migrants at its southern border than it has in the last 20 years due a surge in immigration, Homeland Security Secretary Alejandro Mayorkas said on Tuesday.

"The situation at the southwest border is difficult. We are working around the clock to manage it and we will continue to do so," Mayorkas said in a statement. "We are on pace to encounter more individuals on the southwest border than we have in the last 20 years."